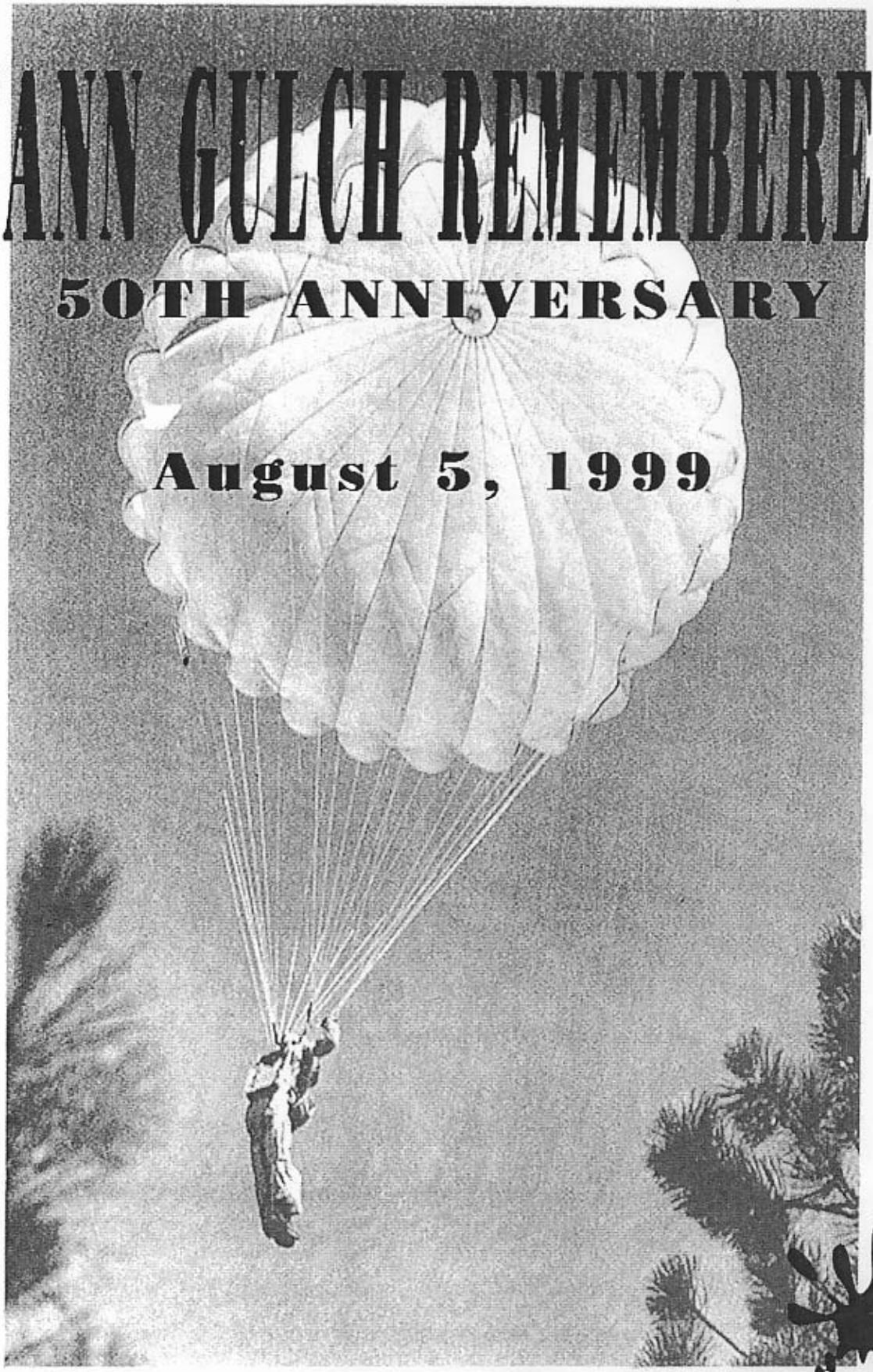
MANN GULCH REMEMBERED

50TH ANNIVERSARY

August 5, 1999



compiled by

Copyright
Pending

MANN GULCH REMEMBERED
50TH ANNIVERSARY

August 5, 1999

"The Mann Gulch fire was momentous from the day it happened. It was the first time in the 10-year history of the smokejumpers and the first time in 52,000 fires in the U.S. Forest Service's Region One that the agency lost an employee fighting a fire. On that day, August 5, 1949, it lost 13 men--12 jumpers and a ground firefighter--to a fire that looked like a routine 60-acre blaze just off the Missouri River."

(From Men of Mann, Missoulian Online, October 8, 1998)

Table of Contents

The booklet information is organized as follows:

Introduction

Photo History

Historical Narrative

Firefighters of Mann Gulch:

Robert J. Bennett
Eldon E. Diettert
James O. Harrison
William J. Hellman
Phillip R. McVey
David R. Navon
Leonard L. Piper
Stanley J. Reba
Marvin L. Sherman
Joseph B. Sylvia
Henry J. Thol, Jr.
Newton R. Thompson
Silas Raymond Thompson
Walter Rumsey
Robert Sallee
Wagner "Wag" Dodge
Robert Jansson
Earl Cooley

Conclusion (Student and Teacher Reflections)

Newspaper Coverage of X-Cel Involvement

Acknowledgments

Addresses of Family and Friends

Introduction

X-CEL Productions, a cross curricular class at Helena High School, provides students the opportunity to learn life skills through project-oriented, problem solving experiences. This is accomplished through the interaction of program participants and community partners.

During the spring of 1998, the Forest Service approached the advisors of X-Cel to see if the class might be interested in helping with the 50th anniversary commemoration of the Mann Gulch tragedy. Their idea was that it would be fitting for the site to be declared and placed on the National Register of Historic Places during the 50th year remembrance. They needed help researching and writing the tedious application that had to be submitted for this to happen. (It was successfully declared in May, 1999.) Thus began a partnership and project that has multiplied into various endeavors throughout this past year.

The students wholeheartedly accepted this challenge and began in earnest the very first week of school in September of 1998. The National Register nomination form consists of three areas: a basic description of the site both now and before the fire, a narrative telling the story of what happened, and the significance of the event. Our research began with the reading and discussion of Norman Maclean's book, Young Men and Fire. Students were each assigned a firefighter to research. The Forest Service brought in many old newspaper articles and other pieces of information that they had collected over the years. Students wrote or e-mailed town libraries, newspapers, or various friends and relatives whose names were discovered in their research to find out more information. In mid September, the class was boated in to Coulter Campground in the Gates of the Mountains to spend the night. While there, we hiked over to Meriwether Picnic Area to view the ranger guard station and the beginning of the trail Jim Harrison would walk up twice that fateful day into Mann Gulch. The next morning we met with the Forest Service at the bottom of Mann Gulch. From there we hiked up to a small platform to the west of the crosses and listened to Dave Turner (USFS) tell the story of "The Thirteenth Fire". As he told the story, lightening struck the mountain across from our perch, rain fell, and the sunshine reappeared to heat up the area. It was here the story truly engulfed us and became REAL and humanly identifiable.

In October, the class visited the Smokejumper's Center in Missoula. We went from the parachute loft to the fire laboratory where several demonstrations were staged to show fire

behavior with wind and certain fuels. Earl Cooley, the spotter on the plane in 1949, met with us and related his memories of the Mann Gulch tragedy. Mrs. Gerry McHenry (Bill Hellman's widow in Kalispell) and Jack Harrison (Jim Harrison's brother) met with us at other times for interviews as well. Information and people's names connected with Mann Gulch were starting to pour in from all over the country. One of our students, Ashley Finnegan, continued personally to correspond with everyone, asking questions, and keeping them informed of what we were doing throughout the year.

Our rough draft writing of the nomination form was handed in to the Forest Service at the beginning of November. It was at this time that our research turned into another project. The Helena Forest Service gives a three part lecture series in February and March of each year. The topic for this year would be firefighting and they wanted to dedicate one night of the series to Mann Gulch and its story. Could we help them? X-Cel not only hosted the lecture series at Helena High School but also created a display which included many artifacts from the Mann Gulch fire plus other pictures and information that had been sent in to us. The Forest Service and X-Cel developed an oral and slide presentation that told the story of "The Thirteenth Fire" (which was the first part of the lecture series). We were asked to do the presentation again in the Helena community and once at the University of Montana School of Forestry. It is this presentation that we are currently producing into a video.

As we continued to get pictures and personal information from various family members and friends of the firefighters, the idea surfaced that some of this material should be incorporated into a booklet to be given to those people who so generously shared their memories. In late April, students laid out their vision of the booklet and began compiling information, scanning pictures, and keying stories. In some instances we tried to garner more details. Please note that this completed copy reflects information received by the beginning of July, 1999. The booklet is being presented at a luncheon on August 5, 1999 hosted by X-CEL in order to honor and thank the family members and friends who shared their stories and contributed to this valuable learning experience.

This booklet is meant *"to further honor the memory of all who perished in Mann Gulch. It happened 50 years ago, but they are still very much on the minds of their family and friends."* (Gary Bennett, nephew of Robert Bennett)

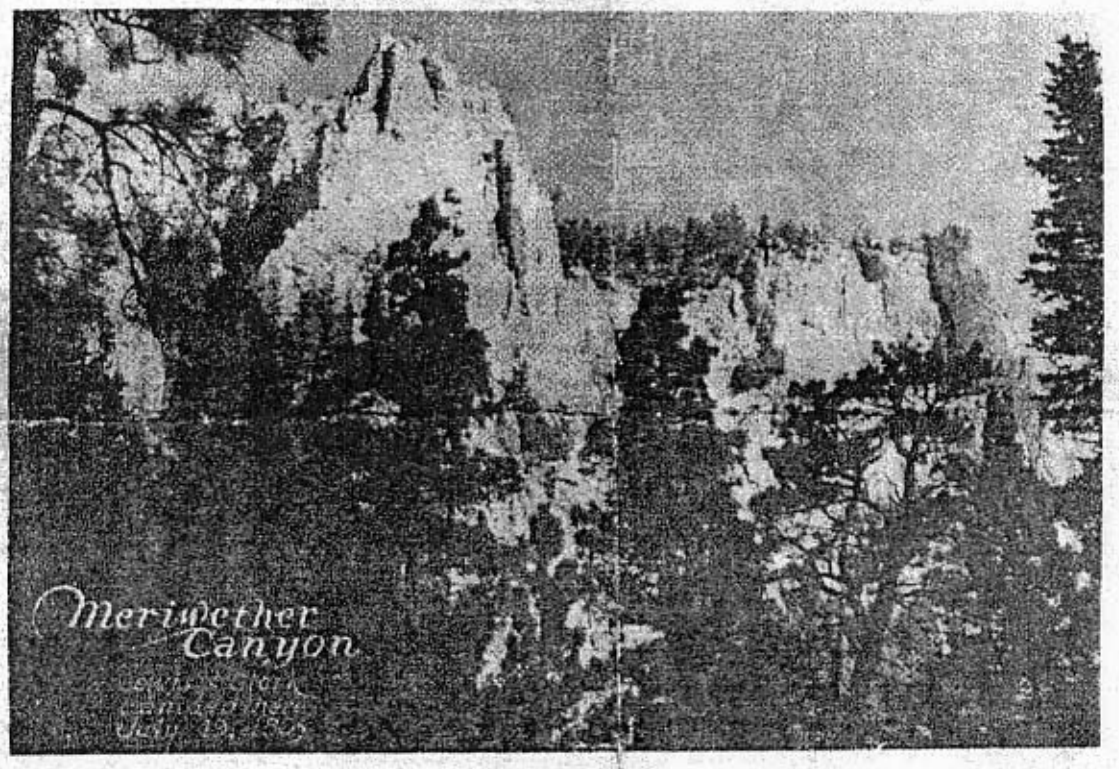
Mann Gulch

Photo donated by Forest Service

RECREATIONAL GUIDE TO

The GATES of the MOUNTAINS AREA

HELENA NATIONAL FOREST



SCENIC MOTOR AND BOAT TRIPS IN THE BIG BELT MOUNTAINS

MONTANA

GOD MADE IT GREEN

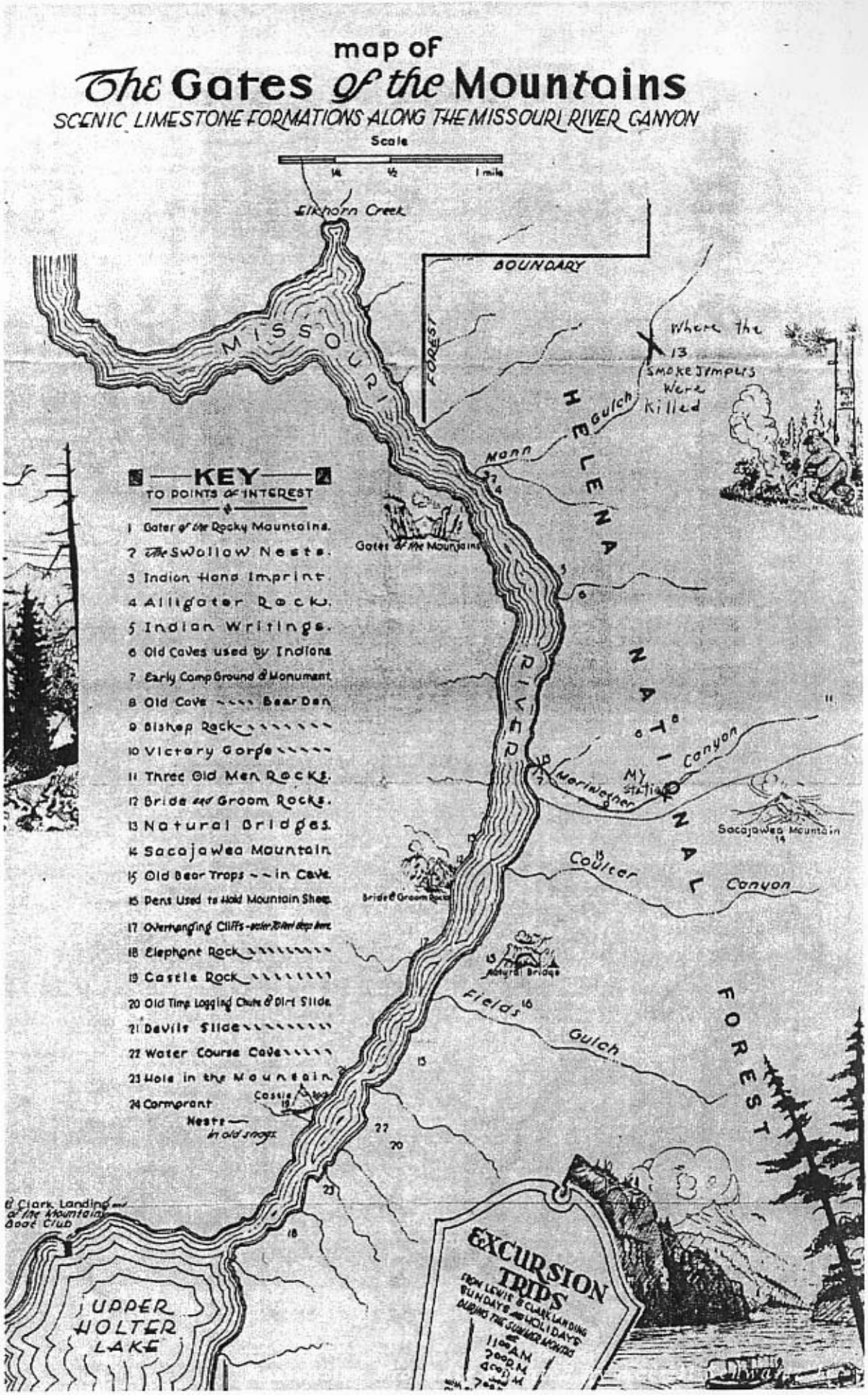
FOREST SERVICE U S DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

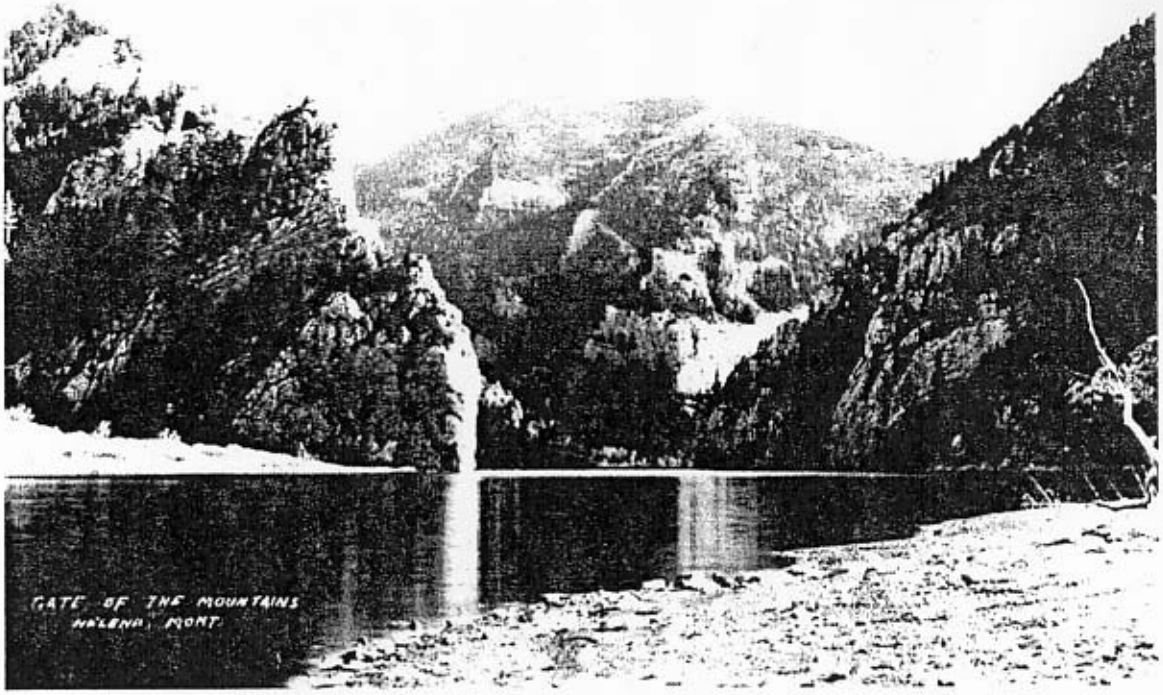
MAN KEEP IT GREEN

LIMESTONE CLIFFS — CAVES — INDIAN PAINTINGS — FISHING
CORMORANTS — CLIFF SWALLOWS — GHOST MINING TOWNS

PREVENT FOREST FIRES

GATES OF THE MOUNTAINS BOAT CLUB


map of
The Gates of the Mountains
SCENIC LIMESTONE FORMATIONS ALONG THE MISSOURI RIVER CANYON
Scale
1/4 1/2 1 mile
Elkhorn Creek
BOUNDARY
FOREST
MISSOURI
Where the 13 SMOKE JYMPERS Were Killed
HELENA
Gulch
Mann
Gates of the Mountains
RIVER
NATIONAL
Canyon
Meriwether
Sacajawea Mountain
Coulter
Canyon
Natural Bridges
Fields
Gulch
FOREST
KEY
TO POINTS OF INTEREST
1 Gates of the Rocky Mountains.
2 The Swallow Nests.
3 Indian Hand Imprint.
4 Alligator Rock.
5 Indian Writings.
6 Old Caves used by Indians.
7 Early Camp Ground & Monument.
8 Old Cave ~~~~ Bear Den.
9 Bishop Rock
10 Victory Gorge
11 Three Old Men Rocks.
12 Bride and Groom Rocks.
13 Natural Bridges.
14 Sacajawea Mountain.
15 Old Bear Traps ~~ in Cave.
16 Pens Used to Hold Mountain Sheep.
17 Overhanging Cliffs - over 70 feet deep here.
18 Elephant Rock
19 Castle Rock
20 Old Time Logging Chute & Dirt Slide.
21 Devils Slide
22 Water Course Cave
23 Hole in the Mountain.
24 Cormorant Nests — in old snags.
Castle Rock
Bride & Groom Rocks
Natural Bridges
Lewis & Clark Landing and Mountain Boat Club
UPPER HOLTER LAKE
EXCURSION TRIPS
FROM LEWIS & CLARK LANDING
SUNDAYS AND HOLIDAYS
DURING THE SUMMER MONTHS
AT
11:00 A.M.
2:00 P.M.
4:00 P.M.



Postcard donated by Merrill Schwartz Jr.

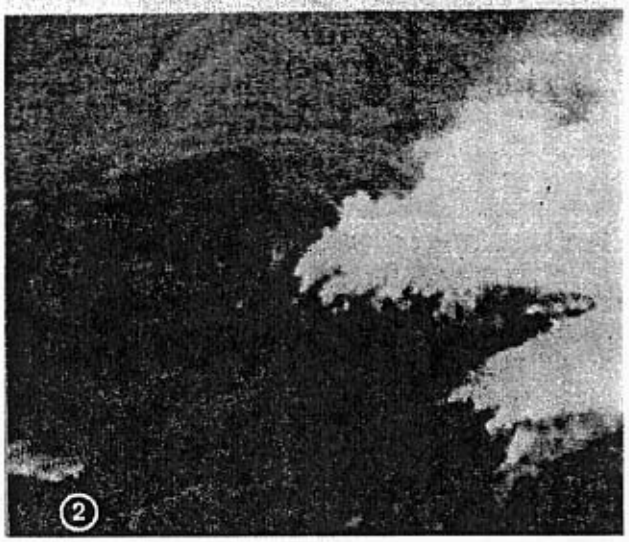
CURRENT FIRE RECORD

Helena Forest J/O Ranger District 1949 Year

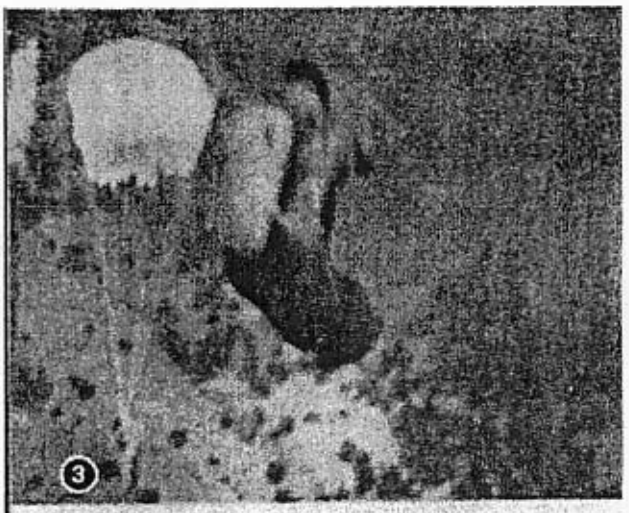
x-4	8	31	Trout Creek	15	11N	1W	–	1800
8-4	9	32	York Gulch	15	11N	1W	–	1917
8-4	10	33	Swants Gulch	23	12N	1W	–	2015
8-4	11	34	Cave Gulch	26	11N	1W	–	1700
8-5	13	35	Mann Gulch	17	13	2W	–	1500
-4	12	36	York	5	11N	1W		1830
4	14	37	Magpie Gul.	NW 27	12N	1E	–	1900
6	15	38	No. 2 Gulch	4	10N	2E	–	2130
	13	39	Fort Harrison	8	10N	4W	–	4[illegible]

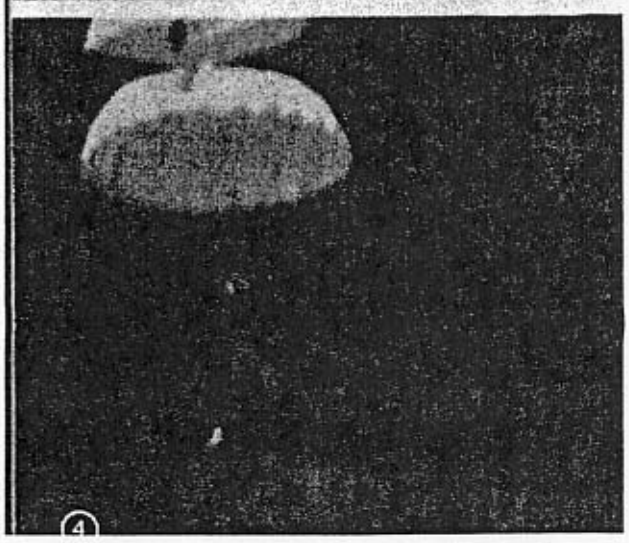
1949

Copied from the official Forest Service fire log August 1949



ACTUAL PHOTOS OF THE FATAL JUMP





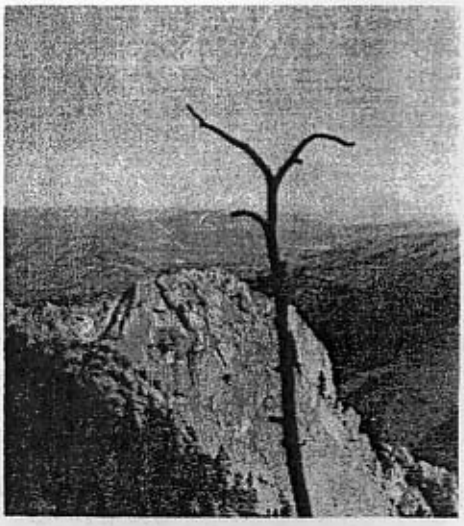
Film shot for training purposes on Mann Gulch flight became a record of the smokejumping tragedy.

1. Crew loading
2. View of the fire and river
3. & 4. Men bailing out on their last jump

Photos from LIFE Volume 27, No. 8 August 22, 1949

August 1949

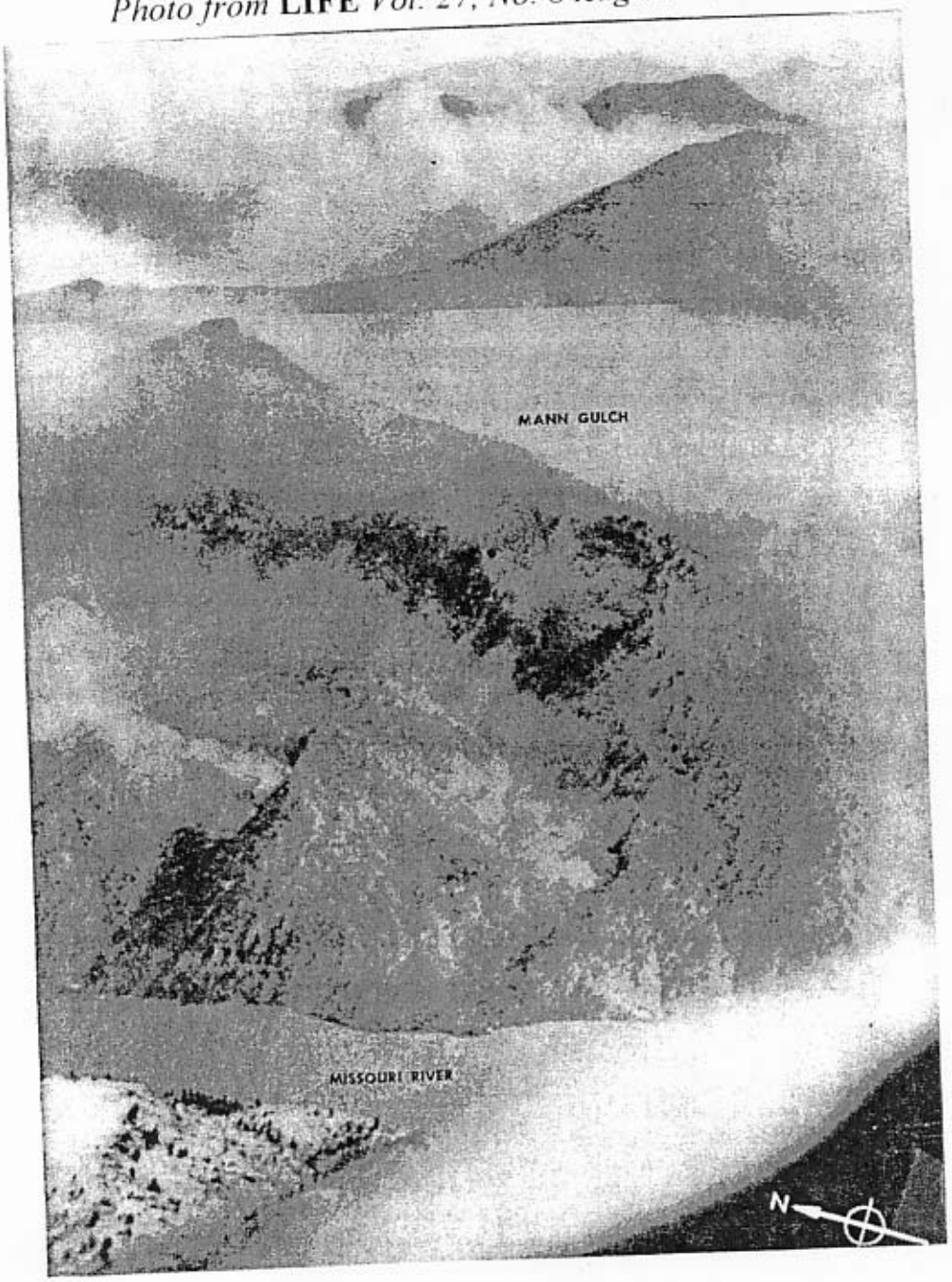
After the Fire



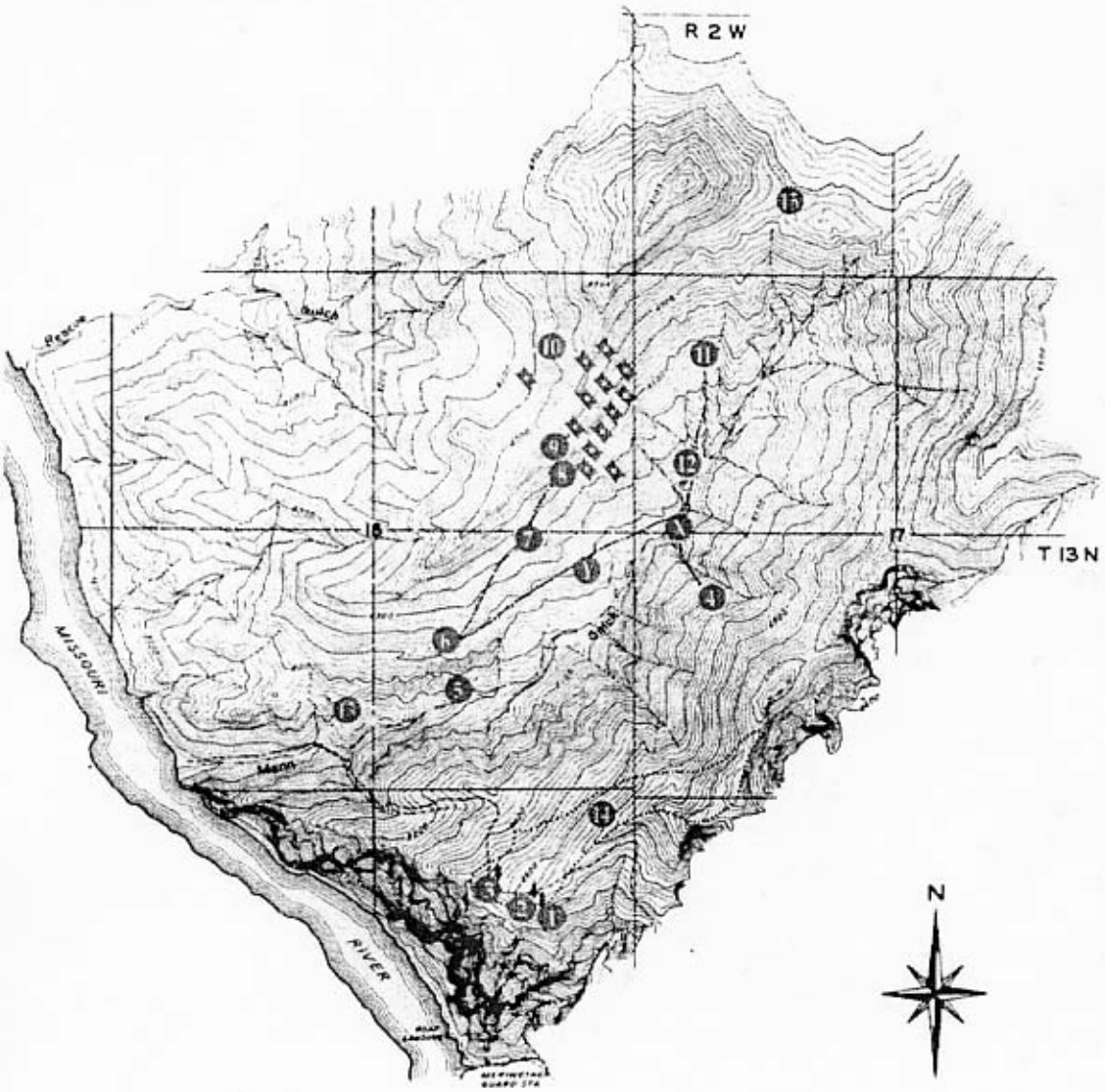
Photos donated by Merrill Schwartz Jr.

From the desk of . .
JACK F. MATHEWS

Photo from **LIFE** *Vol. 27, No. 8 August 22, 1949*



this photo of the MANN GULCH fire area was taken a few days after the fire claimed the lives of the smokejumpers on 5 August 1949. You probably have a copy of this photo from other sources.



Map from Forest Service Mann Gulch brochure

1,2,3	Lightening struck trees
11	Spotter Earl Cooley and Jumper Foreman Wag Dodge selected a jump site
12	Crew gathered gear and ate before attacking the fire
4	Bill Hellman crossed to the south side of Mann Gulch to meet Jim Harrison
X	Dodge and Harrison caught up with the crew
Y	Dodge told the crew to head back up Mann Gulch
5,6	Fire began to blow up
7	Dodge gave instructions to drop gear
8,9	Crew traversed another 200 yards and Dodge lit an escape fire
13	Spot fires
14	Perimeter of fire at the time of the jump and cargo dump
15	Helicopter landing spot
II	Memorials

Historical Narrative

Since its official inception in 1905, the USDA Forest Service has had a history of aggressive fire control, although its efforts were constrained by technology, forest fire remoteness and access, and lack of trained personnel (Graves 1910; McArdle 1952; Pyne 1982). During its early history, the Forest Service relied on military forces to help fight fires. The disastrous fires of 1910 and technological advancements of World War I accelerated innovations in forest fire protection. Aerial surveillance was initiated in 1917, and aerial drops of supplies to firefighting ground forces began in 1925 in the Northern Rocky Mountain Region (Region 1). Increasing sophistication in these aerial drops led to the controversial consideration of airborne firefighting forces through the late 1920's and most of the 1930's. The danger and impracticality of dropping men into heavy timber were the major stumbling blocks (although Germany and Russia had already developed parachuting troops). However, a successful parachute experiment in the state of Washington in 1930, and the persistent advocacy of Dave Godwin (1941), assistant chief of fire control in the agency's Washington Office, led to the establishment of a small Forest Service "smokejumper" force in 1940 (USDA Forest Service 1980). Trained in various locations throughout the Pacific Northwest, including Missoula, Montana, the jumpers were rigorously trained with a variety of ever-evolving gear and equipment.

The smokejumper program almost came to a standstill during World War II because the military was putting together its first parachuting corps and needed experienced jumpers and trainers. The program was kept alive using volunteers from the Civilian Public Service Program (CPS), many of whom were conscientious objectors (Cohen 1983). These jumpers fought fire throughout the Pacific Northwest (it was the worst fire season since 1940) but were replaced

when the CPS program was eliminated at the close of World War II. In 1946, a new smokejumper force was developed with young college students and World War II veterans. Training was completed at a variety of bases; in Region 1, a large pool of some 200 jumpers were stationed at Nine Mile Station (Camp Menard) near Missoula.

Following World War II, new airplane and parachuting technology (i.e., static lines, slotted chutes, headgear, jumper suits, radios) enabled smokejumpers to be dropped into remote fires with their equipment, rations, and water (USDA Forest Service 1980). The firefighters could contain fires until ground reinforcements arrived. However, smokejumper crews were not trained as cohesive units and many had limited fire experience, particularly in the drier forests of central and eastern Montana. For all firefighters, communication was still limited to telephones (and party lines in the case of many rural Ranger District offices) and two-way radios prone to overheating and burn-out (Gray 1982). These were some of the factors that played into events at Mann Gulch in 1949.

In June, 1949, four smokejumpers, including Bill Hellman who would die at Mann Gulch, brought recognition to this firefighting force by a successful jump between the White House and Washington Monument (Cohen 1983). This would be the high-water mark of a ten-year effort to establish the smokejumpers as a viable firefighting force in the Forest Service. The Mann Gulch tragedy in August of this same year necessitated that the Forest Service re-evaluate the safety, preparedness, and understanding of fire behavior among its smokejumper and ground firefighting forces.

Fires occur regularly in the dry Big Belt Mountains, averaging one significant fire every 13-25 years. In 1949, however, several years had passed without a fire and a dense stand of 60-100 year old Douglas fir and juniper covered the south-facing slope in Mann Gulch. The drier, north-facing slope had patches of similarly-aged ponderosa pine extending from the gulch bottom to the ridge line separating Mann and Rescue Gulches. This part of the Gates of the Mountains had been designated a "Wild Area" (a wilderness-like designation at the time) by Congress and no livestock grazing had recently occurred here resulting in a two to three foot high carpet of grass which covered the rocky, unstable slopes. The preceding summer of 1948 had been cool and wet with very few fires. August, 1949 was very different. Several weeks of hot, dry weather had dried out the vegetation in the Big Belts, making conditions ideal for wildfire. On the afternoon of August 4, 1949, a storm system crossed the Continental Divide, producing some rain and many lightening strikes. Twenty-five lightening-caused "smokes" were sighted in the Big Belts, one of which sparked the Mann Gulch wildfire.

On August 5, 1949, fifteen firefighters parachuted into Mann Gulch in an attempt to control a wildfire. The Mann Gulch smokejumper crew was called to the fire at 1:30 p.m. by Helena National Forest Supervisor, Arnold Moir, and Canyon Ferry District Ranger, Robert Jansson, the latter having flown at noon over several lightening "smokes" including the one in Mann Gulch. However, because of the heavy demand on aircraft that day, the smokejumper base in Missoula was able to respond with only a single C-47 plane capable of holding sixteen firefighters and their gear. By mid-afternoon, a quickly assembled smokejumper crew was on its way to Helena. The crew was made up of sixteen men ranging from 19 to 33 years in age, and was led by an experienced jumper and World War II veteran, R. Wagner "Wag" Dodge. One smokejumper, Merle Stratton, was airsick due to turbulence and did not jump at the Mann Gulch fire. The backgrounds (birthplace, age, experience) of the Mann Gulch smokejumper crew are included here:

Name	Origin	Age	Experience
Robert J. Bennett	Paris, TN	22	U.S. Army 3 seasons with FS 1st season smokejumping University student
Eldon E. Diettert	Missoula, MT	19	Non-veteran 3 seasons with FS 1st season smokejumping
James O. Harrison	Missoula, MT	20	Non-veteran 5 seasons with FS Fire guard University student
William J. Hellman	Kalispell, MT	24	U.S. Navy veteran 5 seasons with FS 4th season smokejumping University student
Philip R. McVey	Babb, MT	22	U.S. Navy Air Corps veteran 5 seasons with FS 2nd season smokejumping
David R. Navon	Modesto, CA	28	U.S. Army veteran, paratroops 2 seasons with FS 1st season smokejumping
Leonard L. Piper	Blairsville, PA	23	U.S. Navy veteran 2 seasons with FS 1st season smokejumping University student
Stanley J. Reba	Brooklyn, NY	25	Army Air Corps veteran 3 seasons with FS 2nd season smokejumping University student

Marvin L. Sherman	Missoula, MT	21	U.S. Navy veteran 3 seasons with FS 1st season smokejumping
Joseph B. Sylvia	Plymouth, MA	24	U. S. Marine Air Corps veteran 3 seasons with FS 2nd season smokejumping
Henry J. Thol, Jr.	Kalispell, MT	19	University student Non-veteran 2 seasons with FS 1st season smokejumping
Newton R. Thompson	Alhambra, CA	23	U.S. Army Air Corps veteran 2 seasons with FS 1st season smokejumping
Silas R. Thompson	Charlotte, NC	21	City college student U.S. Army veteran, airborne 3 seasons with FS 2nd season smokejumping
* R. Wagner Dodge	Missoula, MT	33	University student U.S. Coast Guard veteran 9 seasons with FS 8th season smokejumping
*Robert Sallee	Samuels, ID	18	Non-veteran 2 seasons with FS 1st season smokejumping
*Walter B. Rumsey	Garfield, KS	21	U.S. Navy Air Corps veteran 2 seasons with FS 1st season smokejumping

*Survivors of the Mann Gulch wildfire

The smoke on the ridge above Mann Gulch had also been spotted at 10:00 a.m. that morning by the operator of the commercial boat tour in the Gates of the Mountains. He gave this information to fire guard, Jim Harrison, who was stationed at a guard station at the mouth of Meriwether Canyon. Harrison hiked up the trail, observed the fire, and returned to gather up his firefighting gear. Leaving a note on the cabin door stating, "Gone to fire. Be back at 3:00 p.m. Jim", he returned up the trail to Mann Gulch. Harrison, a smokejumper during the 1948 fire season, would eventually join the smokejumpers in Mann Gulch and die in the fire. Harrison had been out of contact with Ranger Jansson since their routine 8:15 a.m. radio check. An hour after Harrison's departure to the fire, the fire lookout on Colorado Mountain saw smoke in Mann Gulch and reported the wildfire.

The Mann Gulch smokejumper crew reached the fire at 3:10 p.m. Crew foreman Dodge and spotter, Earl Cooley, located a jump spot at the head of Mann Gulch after deciding against a site on the Mann Gulch and Meriwether Canyon ridge line in front of the advancing fire. The

crew made the jump safely, but the parachute on the cargo pack containing the crew's radio and other equipment failed to deploy and was destroyed. (In 1993, some of these artifacts were found, mapped, and removed by the Forest Service to avert artifact theft [Fairchild et. Al. 1993]) The crew and their gear were widely dispersed because their jump was not made at the usual low altitude of 1,000 feet due to turbulence. Therefore, it took 50 minutes for the crew to gather and collect their gear at the cargo assembly area. At 5:00 p.m., the crew ate lunch while foreman Dodge set out to locate Jim Harrison, who he heard yelling from the south ridge. Bill Hellman was left in command of the crew. During this same time period, Ranger Jansson, having established a fire base at Meriwether rather than Mann Gulch, tried to hike up the bottom of Mann Gulch to make contact with the jumpers, only to barely escape back to the Missouri River through the burning conflagration.

Dodge made contact with Harrison near the fire on the ridge line and both men set out for the cargo assembly area. They met Hellman and his crew heading upslope to the fire. At this point, Dodge was concerned about the fire on the south ridge and instructed his crew to head down the gulch to the rear of the fire and safety of the Missouri River. Dodge and Harrison then grabbed their water and lunch at the cargo drop and caught up with the crew heading down the gulch. At about 5:45 p.m., Dodge discovered that the fire had "spotted" or jumped from the south ridge to the north slope and was burning rapidly in timber and grass, eliminating their escape route to the river. The crew then reversed its route, heading up the north slope to the ridge line and Rescue Gulch, and away from the fire. Steep, rocky slopes and fingers of thick timber impeded progress and soon thereafter Dodge encouraged the crew to drop all heavy gear. At this point, fear and confusion played a deciding role. Some men dropped their gear but others held on to their packs, shovels, and pulaskis. Foreman Dodge burned out a small area in the grass and encouraged the firefighters nearest him to get inside the blackened safe area. Either they did not hear or understand him, or chose to ignore his orders to get inside his "burn-out". The crew continued running diagonally along the slope rather than directly upward to the ridge line because the pitch of the hillside approaches 75%. But the fire, advancing at a rate of 600 to 700 feet per minute and producing super-heated gasses, quickly overtook them.

Smokejumpers Bob Sallee and Walt Rumsey were the only crew members who made it safely through the vertical rock ledges and then to a scree slope in Rescue Gulch. Twice fire burned over their escape area on the scree slope but they were unharmed. At about 6:15 p.m., foreman Dodge left the safety of his burn-out and located the severely burned Joe Sylvia. Leaving Sylvia on a large, flat rock (which can be identified today in Mann Gulch), Dodge went

over the ridge into Rescue Gulch and found Rumsey and Sallee tending to critically burned Bill Hellman. Leaving Rumsey to attend Hellman, Dodge and Sallee hiked to the Missouri River, where they met a private boater who transported them to the fire camp at Meriwether guard station. There they met Ranger Jansson at 8:50 p.m., who immediately radioed for medical help. By 11:00 p.m., he, Doctors T. L. Hawkins and R. E. Haines of Helena, and a crew were starting up the hill at Rescue Gulch. The rescue was conducted through the night and into the early morning of August 6. Ranger Jansson, Dodge, and the rest of the crew attended to Sylvia and Hellman, who both died later in Helena hospitals, and located the remaining bodies on the burned hillside. On Sunday, August 8, 1949, a light rain helped some 450 firefighters contain the fire. On August 10, the fire was declared controlled after burning some 5,000 acres of grass and timber and claiming the lives of thirteen young men.

The Mann Gulch wildfire disaster received immediate local, regional, and national media attention. The Helena Independent Record, The Missoulian, the Great Falls Tribune, and the University of Montana's Montana Kaimin all closely followed the rescue, fire containment progress, and the Forest Service fire investigation that followed. In late August, 1949, the Mann Gulch story was aired in a radio broadcast of NBC's "Forest Aflame" series in Butte, Billings, Great Falls, Missoula, Boise, Twin Falls, Spokane, and Seattle (Van Meter 1949). Life Magazine also covered the story in August, 1949, and published photographs of the rescue and aftermath. The disaster was a shock to the Forest Service firefighting community and was discussed in forestry journals (i.e., Forbes 1949).

An official inquiry into the events surrounding the Mann Gulch disaster was convened in September, 1949. The Forest Service Board of Review (1949) was composed of high level Forest Service officials and was closed to the press and public. All of the principal people involved with the fire were questioned, including Ranger Jansson who testified on the condition that he be allowed to face away from the reviewers; Jansson felt great sorrow and personal responsibility for the events at Mann Gulch (Jansson n.d.). The Board concluded that no one was directly responsible for what transpired at Mann Gulch. Wag Dodge, Ranger Jansson, and Forest Supervisor Moir were exonerated based on the Board's judgment that each man was responsible for his own course of action during the final moments of the fire escape. Since it remained unclear as to why the fire spotted from the south to the north ridge, the Board recommended intensified study into fire behavior as a way to anticipate and predict future fire "blow-ups". They also recommended better firefighter training. These findings of no fault by the Forest

Service received criticism from some of the fire victim's families (a lawsuit was unsuccessfully brought against the Forest Service) and later by author Norman Maclean (1992).

In November of 1949, pioneer wildfire behavior researcher, Harry Gisborne, visited the Mann Gulch wildfire site with Ranger Jansson. Gisborne was convinced that the causes of forest fires could be reasonably predicted with systematic study and fire preparedness (Hardy 1983). Troubled by a heart condition, Gisborne died of a heart attack in Mann Gulch; the wildfire had indirectly claimed its 14th victim. The cause of the fire's behavior and firefighter reactions at Mann Gulch remain a subject of study and debate, particularly in relation to more recent fire disasters such as the 1994 South Canyon fire in Colorado (i.e., Wiecke 1993; Putnam 1995).

Effect of Mann Gulch Wildfire on Firefighting Practices

The Mann Gulch fire was the thirteenth of some eighty-three fires reported in the Helena National Forest fire log for 1949 (one half of these fires were on private rather than National Forest land). In Fact, Helena National Forest officials were initially more concerned about the York Fire blazing in the Big Belts near a small rural community than with the Mann Gulch fire. The fire season was more intense than in the several preceding years but certainly no worse than the 1940 or 1946 seasons. The 1949 season was exceptional throughout the Forest Service primarily because of the Mann Gulch wildfire and the heavy loss of life during a single, apparently routine fire. Never before had such a loss of life been inflicted on the Forest Service's elite smokejumpers force. The horrific fires that swept across the Pacific Northwest in 1910 had destroyed millions of acres of forest land and killed at least 80 people, but this happened before the Forest Service had developed a firefighting organization and well before the advent of smokejumpers. Later fires, airplane crashes, and accidents would incrementally take their toll of firefighter lives. But Mann Gulch was the warning bell with the Forest Service that even an effective firefighting force such as the smokejumpers was no match for the unpredictable fury of a wildfire. More precautions and safety were needed.

Each year thousands of men and women commit their energy and lives to fighting wildfires. The equipment, safety measures, and understanding of wildfire behavior that buffers these firefighters from potential disaster can be traced back to tragedies such as Mann Gulch. Following the Mann Gulch Board of Review's recommendations, more intensive training was provided to smokejumpers and all wildfire fighters in the 1950's and continues today. This evolution in training is clearly illustrated by comparing the fire prevention sections in Forest Service manuals dating prior to and then after 1949. The Mann Gulch smokejumper crew was quickly put together to respond to a small fire on the Helena National Forest. Some of the crew

members did not know each other and no one but Bill Hellman was well acquainted with the crew foreman, Wag Dodge. In fact, the smokejumpers worked out of a rotating pool of some 150 men. They were not trained or dispatched to fires as established crews. As a consequence, the crew sent to Mann Gulch lacked a clear identity and cohesiveness which probably played into individual decisions made during the final moments of their attempted escape (Weick 1993). Whether the crew members did not hear Dodge, understand his instructions, or simply refused to trust in their assigned crew leader's judgment in using a burn-out or escape area is unknown. However, in contrast, today's firefighting crews are trained under a specific command structure and work together all season in fire and non-fire related activities. The obvious purpose is to engender greater crew cohesiveness and communication than that exhibited at Mann Gulch.

The Mann Gulch fire, and several other fires where several casualties were incurred during the same time period, led to increased concern for basic firefighter survival. As a fledgling firefighting unit, most smokejumpers of the Mann Gulch time period had relatively limited experience in fighting fires, especially east of the Continental Divide. As a consequence, some fire experts speculate that the "flashy" nature of east-side timber and grass fuels was underappreciated by the Mann Gulch crew. This unfamiliarity may help explain why the crew selected the grassy slope leading to Rescue Gulch as one of two designated escape routes. Firefighters, including smokejumpers, now have broader experience to ensure familiarity with a wide range of local conditions, fuels, terrain, and weather patterns.

The Mann Gulch fire also re-emphasized the need for safety zones and routes--areas comparatively free of danger that allow firefighters to escape if a fire "blows up". The two escape routes in Mann Gulch--downslope to the Missouri River and the rock slide below the ridge in Rescue Gulch--weren't easy to access and were too far apart. No alternatives between the two were available. Once the escape route to the river was on fire, the crew was left to scramble up a very steep (75 percent), rocky slope. Dodge and his crew had scouted the area and had formed a general escape plan but apparently did not consider all of the conditions (flashy fuels, aridity, steep slope, 97 degree temperatures) present at Mann Gulch. Even on small, routine fires, escape plans are carefully developed thanks to the hard lesson learned at Mann Gulch and similar fire disasters. Coupled with better communication systems (the Mann Gulch smokejumper crew had only one radio where today every firefighter carries a hand-help radio), strategic and tactical firefighting planning has eliminated some of the fire "unpredictability" described in the Mann Gulch Board of Review's report.

Despite the controversy surrounding Wag Dodge's use of a fire-blackened burn-out, it is one of the first documented uses of this survival technique in the history of Forest Service firefighting. A burn-out (also called an "escape fire") is an area where vegetation has been previously burned (either by wildfire or deliberately by firefighters) and no fuels are available during a forest fire. By lying face-down in the pre-burned area with a wet cloth covering the face, a firefighter can breathe the remaining oxygen close to the ground as the fire burns around this safe area. Dodge's use of a burn-out caught the attention of the Mann Gulch Fire Board of Review and it soon became a mandatory training topic.

The Mann Gulch wildfire tragedy brought to fruition a twenty-year effort by Harry Gisborne and a handful of other fire researchers to establish a program of systematic study of forest fire behavior (Hardy 1983). The Forest Service Fire Laboratory in Missoula, Montana, was created in the wake of the Mann Gulch wildfire (Rothermel 1993). In the years following the Mann Gulch event, Forest Service fire centers in Montana and Colorado focused attention on fire behavior and the development of safer firefighting gear and equipment. These improvements ranged from fire retardant clothing, helmets ,and hardhats, to reflective metal-coated fireshelters which enable firefighters to survive burn-overs similar to the one experienced at Mann Gulch. Parachutes are now sized to make the drop rate similar for people with different weights; net webbing was added to the bottom of the chute to prevent it from opening the wrong way. The study of fire is so important that trained "fire behavior specialists" are now standard members of all fire incident command teams. The funnel-shape of Mann Gulch creates a suction-effect during high winds. Since flames travel faster upward than downward (the same effect as holding a burning match upside down), the Mann Gulch fire was literally sucked up the gulch, eventually producing its own wind and super-charged gases. If this information had been available in 1949, it is unlikely that smokejumpers would have been dropped at the head of Mann Gulch. Fire researcher Harry Gisborne's legacy at Mann Gulch is that he pioneered the aggressive study of wildfire behavior as an essential component of firefighting.

Ultimately, Mann Gulch and a handful of other wildfires dating to this time period, ushered in a new era of firefighting focused on "safety first"--know fire conditions and commit only well-trained and prepared firefighting crews to front-line action. The Ten Standard Fire Orders adhered to today are not the single product of the Mann Gulch fire. They were born out of the primary period of significance of Mann Gulch--the post-World War II era--and reflected the military background of the Forest Service and firefighting workforce. They have evolved over time and are a useful measure of changes in firefighting since Mann Gulch:

the military background of the Forest Service and firefighting workforce. They have evolved over time and are a useful measure of changes in firefighting since Mann Gulch:

Fight fire aggressively but provide for safety first.
Initiate all action based on current and expected fire behavior.
Recognize current weather conditions and obtain forecasts.
Ensure instructions are given and understood.

Obtain current information on fire status.
Remain in communication with crew members, your supervisor, and adjoining forces.
Determine safety zones and escape routes.
Establish lookouts in potentially hazardous situations.
Retain control at all times.
Stay alert, keep calm, think clearly, act decisively.

The hard lessons learned at Mann Gulch, as reflected in the current Standard Fire Orders, are taken to heart by all Forest Service wildlands firefighters and smokejumpers. For this reason, thirteen men did not die in vain at Mann Gulch.

The following section in this book includes biographies, personal stories, and photographs sent to and collected by the X-Cel students.

Robert J. Bennett

Robert J. Bennett
Paris, Tennessee

Robert James Bennett was born March 18, 1927 in Paris, Tennessee to Robert Guy and Annie Moses Bennett. Robert was the third of four children. His older siblings were Jeanne Moses Bennett (now Sharber), Maurice Guy Bennett (now deceased), and his younger sister Joyce B. Bennett (now Russell). Dr. Augustus Oliver, family physician, friend, and neighbor, ushered Robert into the world and saw him through the usual childhood illnesses and one life-threatening bout with diphtheria when he was four.

Bob was a good brother, son, and human being—one of those rare people who truly cared about others and exhibited excellent character traits throughout life. He attended Sunday School and worship services, joining the First Christian Church in Paris. He completed elementary school in the same town, and we chased lightning bugs, wove clover chains, played Hide and Seek, Red Rover, Tag, and other childhood games. When I climbed the gnarly apple tree in our backyard and panic struck, it was Bob's steady hand which guided me safely to the ground again.

Bob did most of the things boys did then. He had a paper route, built and flew kites, made model airplanes, and experimented with chemistry and woodburning sets. Lest anyone polish a premature halo for him, however, he also started a grass fire near the garage, experimenting with matches and frightening our mother to near hysterics. His mind was curious but never vicious. He dropped a tiny piece of tobacco into my sister's eye once to see what would happen and was shocked when she reacted so quickly and so loudly. Another time, he called me (in that same backyard), "Stop or I'll shoot!" I blithely kept running, never believing for a minute that my older brother, my guide and protector, would actually do such a thing with his new BB gun. But temptation overcame him. When the BB struck my back, not even penetrating my clothing, I howled mightily, sure that I was mortally wounded. He was properly contrite because this aberration had been a rare exception to his kind and generous nature.

Bob's interest in the outdoors was always there. He played football in high school as a center and worked hard and consistently. It was about

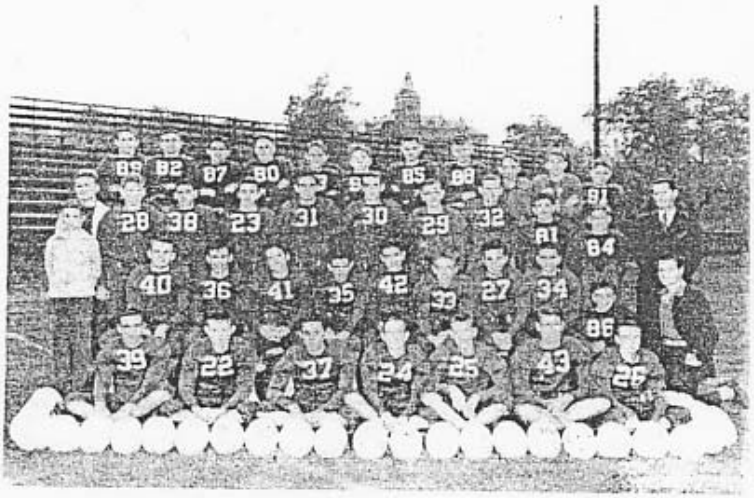


Photo Courtesy of Gary Bennett

this time that a classmate of his who had a crush on him made friends with me in order to visit our home. She was a sweet honest girl who told me of her infatuation and we remained friends. She visited our home after Bob died and grieved with us.

Bob was reserved and had a quiet strength of character. He was an honorable person with a good sense of humor. He was not preachy or better-than-thou, but was a fine young man.

Just after graduating from E. W. Grove High School, Bob joined the Army on May 30, 1945. He was a member of the 29th General Medical Corps stationed with the occupation forces in Japan. While serving also in Korea, he attained the rank of staff sergeant. He was honorably discharged from the Army on Christmas day, 1946.

Photo courtesy of Gary Bennett

After his service, using the GI Bill, he enrolled in the University of Montana at Missoula because of its reputation for having a fine forestry program. The study of forestry had been his goal since childhood. His letters from Montana told us of his life there, his introduction to the ski slopes, and friends he had met. One was Leonard Piper, who died with him at Mann Gulch. Bob was looking forward to his junior year at the University and knew his smokejumper's pay would help.

This, of course, was not to be. Mann Gulch, August 5, 1949, happened instead. Bob will always be an excellent man in my memory and an important part of my past to be cherished. (The above information about Robert Bennett was given to us by his sister Joyce Russell and his nephew Gary Bennett.)

After the fire Robert Bennett's funeral services were to be held at 2 o'clock Saturday, August 13, 1949 at the First Christian Church. The pallbearers at the funeral were Johnny Miller, Farmer Barnett, Bob Thompson, Johnny Wiggs, Roy Reynolds, and C.O. Futrell Jr.

Robert Sallee (who was a survivor of the fire) wrote a letter to Robert Bennett's mother after the fire and it reads. . . .

I'm glad you have written to me as I have been wanting to tell you about Bob. The smokejumpers are some of the best fellows in the world and your son was one of the best-liked men in camp. Several of the fellows came to me after I came back from that fire and asked if Bob had been along. I shall never forget the look of shock and pain on their faces when I told them that he had.

Of the men who died at Mann Gulch, Bob was the only one who showed any sign of using his head and thinking out a way or method which might have meant survival for him. He took refuge in an open spot where there was nothing but grass. There, he lay face down and gambled that the flames would go through the grass so fast that he would

not burn. But God had decided it was Bob's time to come. He died without suffering because there is no pain from a hemorrhage of the lungs.

Your son is a hero. All men who die protecting something they love are heroes. Bob loved the forests very much. He died in a war that is as great as any other war ever fought on this earth. The war man fights against the eternal enemy of the forest—fire.

Your pastor is right. Bob lives. He lives in the hearts of every man, woman, and child that loves the forest.

Robert Bennett and his sister Joyce

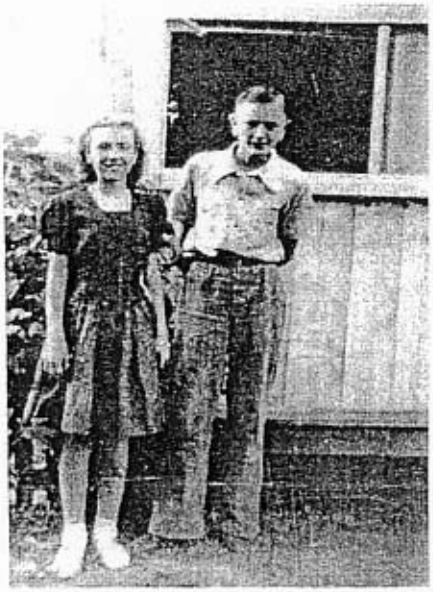


Photo Courtesy of Gary Bennett

Robert Bennett (left), his mother (in the middle), and Robert's sister (on the right)

Photo Courtesy of Gary Bennett

Eldon E. Diettert

Eldon E. Diettert
Moscow, Idaho

Eldon E. Diettert was born August 5, 1930, in Moscow, Idaho, the second son of Reuben and Charlotte Diettert. His brother Gerald was three years older and his sister Doris was nine years younger.

At that time, Father was an assistant in Botany at the University of Idaho and Mother a housewife. Since Eldon was the only one in the family with naturally curly hair, Mother allowed it to grow uncut until it was shoulder length, resembling Shirley Temple's hair. Frequently the mailman teased Eldon about his hair, calling him a "little girl." One day, when he was approaching three, following such taunting, he kicked the mailman in the shins and proclaimed, "I'm not a girl!" He was given a haircut soon after. When he was four, his brother took him to the Saturday morning movie series, "Buster Brown and his Dog" several times. Each time Eldon cried because he was "afraid of the dog" and had to be taken home before the movie even started, much to his brother's disgust.

When Eldon was five, the family moved to Iowa City, Iowa, where Father returned to school to obtain a Ph.D. in Botany, receiving a Fellowship of $35.00 a month. During this time, the family lived in several apartments. While Father was in school, Mother worked as a custodian at the Dental School for $15.00 a month, happy to be employed during the Depression. Father did his Doctoral thesis on sagebrush and engaged his two sons in sanding and polishing sections of the stems for illustrations. The brothers spent the summers at Grandfather Diettert's farm near North Judson, Indiana, where Grandmother tried to fatten them on cream and whole milk. She also gave them chickens to raise, then served the "pets" for dinner before their departure for home at the end of the summer!

Two years later, in the fall of 1937, the family moved to Missoula, Montana, where Father was a member, and subsequently Chairman, of the Botany Department at the University of Montana. Soon after the move, both brothers obtained magazine routes, selling door to door such periodicals as Liberty, True Confessions, and True Detectives. Eldon continued his route (the route being an area of town considered to be his "property" to solicit customers) throughout grade school and was very conscientious and punctual with his customers. Some of the money earned went into the family coffers but part was saved "for college."

At Paxon Grade School, Eldon was an excellent student and received high marks. He was well liked by his teachers and fellow students and earned his "letter" on the school basketball team. He was a member of Cub Scout Pack 1, Den 2, but did not continue in the Boy Scout program. He participated in a music program at the University, learning to play the clarinet. In the summer, the family picked huckleberries to supplement their income. Another adventure occurred in the forest when he and his brother climbed about 2000 feet to a saddle on Mount Sentinel just east of the University to cut down a Christmas tree. The butt measured four inches and the tree was so large

that fifteen feet was cut from the top and dragged home where Father shortened it again. Eldon liked to build model airplanes powered by rubber bands, and after they had crashed and been repaired repeatedly, set them on fire and launched them from his second-story bedroom window to "go down in flames."

In 1939, a sister, Doris Jean, was born. Over the next ten years, Eldon was her chief protector, looking after her every need and taking her to movies and other local events.

During the summer when he was nine and ten, Eldon helped his brother with caring for neighborhood lawns. Sometimes the grass was so tall that Eldon had to pull on a rope tied to the mower while his brother pushed. Eldon took over the lawn jobs on his own when he was eleven and twelve. During high school he worked after school and summers for the K & W Grocery delivering groceries and stocking shelves. He started oil painting in his spare time, steadily improving his artistic skills. Family vacations included camping in Glacier National Park and other sites. Along with his father, he was engaged in dry fly fishing and became an avid fan. In the summer of 1945 he worked on a section gang for the Northern Pacific Railroad, becoming very strong as he grew to 6'3" in height.

In 1946, 1947, and 1948 he worked for the U.S. Forest Service at "Camp Nowhere" in Northern Idaho in the blister rust prevention program. While there his supervisor, Ken McCracken, told him there was no accurate map of the region. McCracken wrote him later in October, 1948 stating, "I did not get to tell you how much I appreciated having you work for me this summer; not one of the boys' work was comparable to yours. Keep up the good work, Deet. Get all the education you can, because you have what it takes." During this time he compiled a 185-page manuscript, each page describing a flower, tree, bird or animal he had observed, accompanied by a drawing.

By the fall of 1948 he had decided that forestry would be his calling and enrolled at the University of Montana in the School of Forestry. He continued his scholastic excellence by making the high honor roll each quarter. Father bragged that Eldon was one of the best forestry students he ever had, but his view was felt to be prejudiced.

In late March, 1949, he received word he had been accepted as a smokejumper-fireman and was to report to the Ninemile training camp on June 14. He was very excited about the challenge provided by this opportunity and viewed it as another window in his chosen career. On July 5 and 20 he sent letters to his parents, describing his training and first seven jumps, illustrating them with sketches. He was called away from his nineteenth birthday luncheon at home to jump on the Mann Gulch fire.

I recall vividly Mother running out of the front door while the rest of the family waited to hear about Eldon's whereabouts. She had just received a phone call. "He's gone, he's gone!" she screamed in anguish.

In <u>Young Men and Fire</u>, Maclean referred to a family that never spoke about their loss in deference to the mother. This was true in our family; the fire was never discussed and one treaded lightly in even recalling episodes in his remarkable but short life. How much more he could have accomplished!

The previous biography was sent in by Eldon's brother Gerald Diettert. Many people wrote in on behalf of Eldon. Joe O'Loughlin said, *"He and I were next door neighbors from age six and the best of friends."* When news came about the death of Eldon Diettert, Bill Hainline and Bill Nash went to the fire and signed up to help fight it in memory of Eldon.

Photo courtesy of Peter Stackpole

James O. Harrison

James O. Harrison
Missoula, Montana

James O. Harrison was born on January 29, 1929 in Missoula Montana. James' family consisted of his father Arthur, mother Susan, and two brothers John "Jack" Harrison and Arthur "Larry" Harrison. The Harrison family was very close growing up and were good friends of the Dietterts who lived near them.

James Harrison was an excellent student by anyone's standard. He was also very athletic. In 1945 James and his brother Jack were on the 1945 State Championship Football Team. James received an Elks Scholarship to go on to college. He was a chemistry major at Montana State University (the current University of Montana). His scholarship, personality and strength of character were that of a superior individual. (Paraphrased from Gary Nelson's ONE YOUNG MAN AND FIRE)

James Harrison had been with the Forest Service for three years and was a smokejumper for two years. His mother Susan pleaded with him not to smokejump and convinced him to take a "less dangerous" job. In 1948 James came to Gary Nelson and asked if he could help him get a ground job in the Forest Service next summer. Gary told him to send a completed SF-57 to Ranger J. Robert Jansson, with a note attached saying we had talked. Later that year Jansson was in Missoula on other business and met James. After a short visit, Jansson hired him on the spot and told him that he would fill a newly created job as a recreation guard at Meriwether Campground. He explained to Jim that the campground was located at the mouth of Meriwether Canyon, just south of Mann Gulch on the Missouri River, and was accessible only by boat.

James' job would include making a fire patrol. That meant hiking up the north ridge of Meriwether Canyon after all lightning storms, and when otherwise directed, for the purpose of checking on any smokes that might be visible.

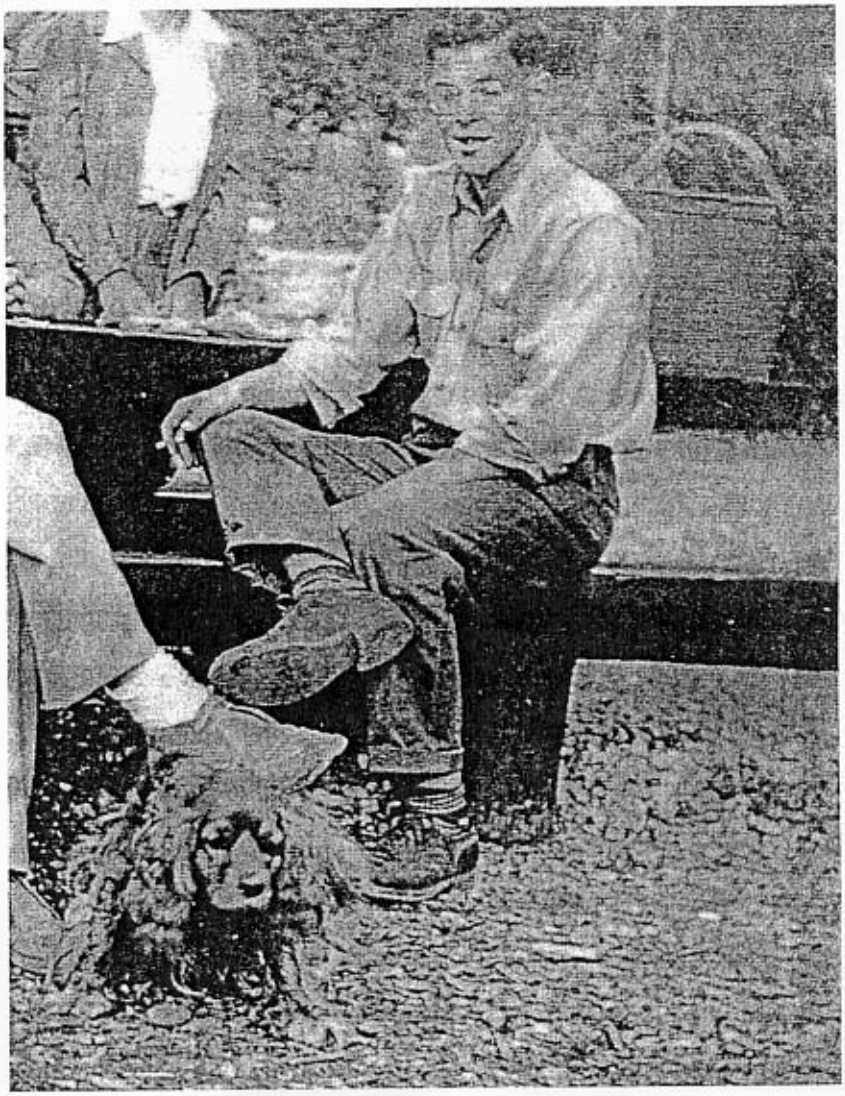


Photo courtesy of the Harrison family

James Harrison
Sunday July 24, 1949

James wrote this letter to his parents back home after starting his new job in the Gates of the Mountains:

Canyon Ferry R.S.
Helena, Montana
June 18, 1949

Dear Mother and Dad,

I really am sorry I didn't write sooner, but they put me out in a camp the first day I arrived. At the present time I am at the ranger station. I will be here until Monday or Tuesday and then go back out to some camp.

This district is quite a bit different than Powell, both in the type of country and the way it is run. The ranger, Bob Jansson, is sort of a funny person, he seems to be a little wishy-washy. For some reason or other he had the idea I could type and he was going to have me work in the office. I told him I couldn't type but he wasn't convinced until he had me type a six page report, which took me almost 4 hours. Then he seen the light. He didn't quite know what I was to do for the summer or what I was to be paid. In fact I worked all this week without knowing what I was or how much my pay was. When we got back down yesterday I heard some rumors that I am to be the recreation guard at the "Gates of the Mountains." That is the job I wanted all along. Of course things can still change, and I haven't got the official word yet, but everybody thinks that is what I will do. The pay rate is either S.P.-H or POSP.-5, which will be a fair salary.

This district is a different type of country. Near the ranger station (and also close to the dam), it is hilly with scrub timber, but further back it is more heavily timbered and more like the country around Missoula. The dam is going to be right across the Missouri River, directly opposite the ranger station. Consequently the station has to be moved. The dam project looks a lot like Gand Coulee Dam, with its little villages, etc.

So far I have been doing regular common labor. We have been cutting a new trail into a place they call "Hanging Cliffs" which is supposed to be a very scenic and impressive place. However I haven't seen it and I don't suppose I will. I worked telephone line one day with the alternate ranger.

We had quite an experience Friday. It started raining Thursday afternoon and continued into the night. When we woke up it was rather chilly (we were in a tent). The one fellow opened the door and all I could see was white. There was 8" of snow on the ground and more was coming down in the form of a blizzard. We couldn't go up on the trail so we put in signs on the road to the stations. (I guess I should have mentioned I wasn't at the station but at a camp on Magpie Creek.) It was sure a miserable day to work. I about froze to death in the morning. The snow sure surprised me. I didn't think we were quite-that-high at our camp, however I found out--we were at about 6,000 ft.

I saw Jack last Sunday. I think you can quit worrying about him. They are still working and will be in Helena all summer. He did not miss any work when George was sick. Also they might go to work for Kile Construction Co., however Kile Construction Co. is working on the dam, so he will still be in Helena. And he definitely is going back to school. And also a big

surprise, he even has money in the bank, at least he did last Sunday, of course that was just after payday.

*Well I guess I had better quit my scribbling. Oh! Dad: "**Happy Father's Day**." I hate to ask this but I would like to have you send me some stuff. Send me one copy of my A.C.S. magazine, also a camera and film. There is no hurry about that stuff. Also send me my knapsack.*

Well I had better close now. My address is Canyon Ferry R.S.
Helena, Montana.

Love,
Jim

This is another letter that was sent to Larry,James's little brother:

Canyon Ferry R.S.
Helena, Montana
July 9, 1949

Dear Larry,

I have been so busy lately, that I haven't had time to write. Well, right now I am down at the "Gates of the Mountains," it is sure nice here. It is about like a lookout except people come here. I have visitors every day, of course they are strangers but what is the difference, they still are people.

I came down here on the boat, which is the quickest way, otherwise you have to walk about 10 miles. It is a funny thing, the main highway to Great Falls is only five miles from here, but it is across the river. I haven't seen any game outside of a couple of deer. The man who runs the boat said he seen bear a couple of miles up the river. He will probably visit me before the summer. The fishing is no good here. The only fish out here are carp, and suckers and they are no good to eat.

Do you know how I take a bath here? Well I take a bar of soap and jump in the river. This is really the life. I don't think I have done more then 3 days of hard work. I will probably be so soft I won't be able to walk down town when I get back.

How are things going at home? What did you do on the Fourth of July? I just stayed right here myself, lots of company. How is that room in the basement coming. I sure would like to have it, but I guess you had better. It will be the first time you will have had one to yourself.

I am sending you a couple of maps of this area, I put a few labels on them to show you where I am.

What have you heard from Jack? I saw him about 2 or three weeks ago, but only for a few minutes. I had to borrow some money to buy my uniform with. Oh, yea, I have a uniform, green pants, brown shirt, green tie, a hat, a little tin badge. Of course I never wear the hat and tie unless the ranger is around or some other big twig.

Will I guess I had better quite rambling and sign off. Don't mind the poor writing, as I am reverting back to nature, forgetting how to write and never read a paper.

Love,
Jim

No one would have known what would happen on August 5, 1949. To James it was just another day. He spotted some smoke over the ridge. He quietly gathered his fire-fighting gear, which consisted basically of a shovel, a polaski, and some water for drinking and headed up the mountain. In his cabin he posted a note "Gone to fight fire."

Around 5:15 Harrison meets up with Wag Dodge, foreman of the smokejumping crew and together they go back to the other smokejumpers. At this point, Harrison had been fighting the fire alone for about seven hours and is exhausted. James O. Harrison died on August 5, 1949 while trying to outrun a fire that would inevitably catch him.

Jack Harrison his brother was called to come and identify his body. *"His body was not burned like you think would think,"* said Jack Harrison. James's glasses, pocket watch, compass, and other effects were next to his body and his mother kept them. *"Jim was always open about his faith. When he spoke of it, people didn't realize his words would give us comfort after the fire. But our mother never did get over what happened to Jim."*

Services for James Harrison were held at St. Anthony's Church in Missoula. He is buried in St. Mary's Cemetery with his mother and father.

The family received a letter from Robert Jansson shortly after the Mann Gulch fire detailing his thoughts about the fire and Jim. He wanted the family to know what had transpired the hours before and after Jim's death. The letter appears on the next page.

Photo copied from **Popular Science, Sept. 1949**

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
FOREST SERVICE
HELENA NATIONAL FOREST

K
PERSONNEL-Helena
Harrison, James O.

Canyon Ferry Ranger Station
Helena, Montana
August 25, 1949

Mr. and Mrs. A. H. Harrison
316 South Avenue West
Missoula, Montana

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Harrison:

Please accept my deepest sympathy in your sorrow.

It has been a black perica for everyone. I shall always regret not arriving on the fire sooner since upon arrival I did not ha ve a chance to get into Mann Gulch before the men were dropped on the fire. In fact I never knew for sure they had jumped until I got back to Meriwether and got on the radio. As it was the fire cut me off after I started up Mann Gulch and I had to turn and run for it.

When Wag Dodge reported in to me that night I still thought Hersey had found Jim on the fire line and had him with his crew. When Hersey came off the fire the first thing he told me was he had been unable to find Jim. We then learned from Dodge that Jim had joined his men.

That morning I had talked to Jim over the radio. He reported heavy lightning the day before so we decided to set up a patrol. This was set for 11 a.m. and Jim was to radio back to us at 3:30 p.m. This of course would necessitate his returning to Meriwether.

Harvey Jensen informs me that when he brought a boat load of tourists down river at 11:45. He saw smoke! He stopped at the Cabin at 12:15 and met Jim running down the trail wringing wet with sweat. Jim tried to radio Canyon Ferry or Missoula and could reach neither although another radio picked up Jim but was transmitting on a different frequency so they never were able to get together. (This was the Nine Mile Ranger Station Radio) Jim asked Harvey to telephone the fire in to us when he got up river. At the time I was patroling the district by plane but was on the other end of the district and observed no smoke until 12:25. Jim also told Harvey he was going back to the fire but would be back down at 3:30 for sure since he had been instructed to radio in at that time. He then left a note on his cabin door stating he had gone to the fire and then hurried back up to the fire.

Canyon Ferry Radio was not on as that was no schedule set for that time.

From the evidence on the ground after the fire we have deduced that Jim went up to the fire proceeded to attack the fire on the

the southeast edge - which was the proper place to attack the fire and was a perfectly safe point to work at the time. Jim then started to build a line around the fire on the Mann Gulch side heading the fire towards the river which was excellent judgement.

Jim must have fought like a tiger since his line held through the blow-up which came later. His line held until late that evening when a crew of 20 men couldn't hold it any longer.

Jim displayed great courage in tackling this monster of a fire all by himself. He apparently felt he was holding the line on his end thereby making the decision which cost him his life - to not abandon the line but to hold it instead of returning to Meriwether to radio. With conditions what they were at that time this was the proper decision and it bespeaks higly for Jim that he made this decision instead of the easy way out of returning to his radio.

Unkown to Jim who continued to hold his line after the jumpers arrived a spot fire developed some distance away from the main fire. The fire was now large enough so that no one person in anyone place could accurately judge what was going on. Men made decisions on the facts as they could determine them from their location. When Dodge discovered there was a potentially dangerous spot fire he decided it was not safe for Jim to be where he was. From Dodges location and knowledge of the fire I believe his decision in calling Jim down with him was correct.

Events happened so rapidly after that that no one person can hope to piece together all the facts and get a true picture of what happened. When fires blow-up it is like an atomic bomb explosion. I was approaching the boys from below but had no idea they were still in the area or that anyone had jumped. I knew I'd have to very careful of my timeing because I could see the fire was getting ready to blow. When the blow-up came I ran down hill through cooler parts of the fire and got out before my escape avenue was closed. This avenue closed before the boys coming down hill reached it and that is why they swung back uphill.

The survivors all told me Jim was worn-out from his magnificent fight on the line but at that of those who died instantly he was the highest up the hill. Jim had used up his strength doing his duty to the bitter end. No more can be said of any man. If he hadn't given his all on the line he might of had strength enough to have outdistanced the fire. Here again Jim's head was working because he was the only one headed towards a gap in the rock cliffs ahead. The blast overtook him. I was the first one to reach Jim afterwards when we sent out the rescue party. Jim died instantly and never knew what overtook him. There was no suffering and no sign of panic or fear.

From the position that I found the rest of the bodies I am convinced that none of the men were panic-stricken. They probably felt that Dodge's escape fire was too small or that the fire was too hot for so small a patch to protect the crew.

The fact that Dodge escaped in this manner may or may not be evidence that all would have escaped if they had stayed with Dodge. Dodge may have been lucky and been in a cool spot of air. Another man beside Dodge might have been caught in a hot blast. My experience in going through the lower part of the fire indicated that there were cool streaks of air occuring in the wall of superheated air and gases. After all two men saved themselves by out running the fire so that was possible too.

Conditions being what they were at the time of the blow-up I don't feel anyone is in a position to say that what anyone did in the face of that fire was right or wrong. I think each man depended on his own judgement. The fact that some escaped and some did not was an act of God and not of man.

At the time I led the rescue party through the fire that night after we finally were able to determine that a tragedy had occured, we all felt good that we reachedBill Hellman and Joe Sylvia and were able to ease their suffering that night. Finding these two raised our hopes that we would find additional survivors.

At 4:30 a.m. on Saturday morning in the first streaks of daylight I made the grievious discovery of what had happened to Jim. With the locating of Jim I knew with a sickening certainty that there would be no other survivors. I have never lost any men on the job before nor have I had any of my men seriously hurt. I felt completely crushed.

We carried the two injured men out to the river afterfinding two more of the dead. I spent about 2 hours giving orders concerning control of the fire and organizing further rescue operations in case there should by chance be any other survivors. I then left Meriwether and return to the disaster scene by helicopter and proceeded to search for the others. I located a total of nine bodies before being joined by additional help. I returned to the base camp about 6 p.m. and was met with the news that the two boys we had carried out had passed away.

I hope you will forgive me for going into all these details but at present I am unable to visit with you. I do want you to know the facts directly from me as I was the first man on the ground in every case. There have been so many unfounded and vicious rumors that I have wanted to assure you of the facts. Jim was doing his job; he died a hero doing what he figured was his duty. All of the gang here at Canyon Ferry will always be proud to have known and worked with Jim.

Many of the boat club members through the summer and after the fire have spoken highly of Jim. He was very popular with the visitors at the Gates of the Mountains. They found him courteous

helpful and good company. On the job we found him to be a hard and faithful worker who took his job seriously. He was the best Guard we have ever had at Meriwether. His passing a real loss to us all.

The following is quoted from a letter received from the Helena Trail Riders:

"We would like to say a very special word for Jimmie Harrison who has since given his life trying to preserve this beautiful area. He was such a fine young man, helping our party with everything, hauling bed rolls, groceries, personal belongings, for which most of us thot we should be responsible only to find Jimmie coming along with a big roll on his shoulder and another under his arm, he even helped in the kitchen and when some of our party had to stay over when they lost their horses he opened his quarters to them to make coffee and to share in whatever he had for lunch. There have been tears shed for Jimmie and the other young men who were lost in this tragedy."

Well dear people I hope we may visit with you soon. You must be wonderful folks since you had such a fine son. If there is ever anything we can do to be of service to you please let us know. I will be glad to answer any questions or do anything you might desire.

If you wish we can arrange to take you up Mann Gulch to the cross that has been erected at the place Jim was found. We certainly would be glad to take you to Meriwether and see the beuatiful Gates area whenever you feel you are able to make the trip.

Please accept my sincere regrets and sympathy.

Very sincerely yours,

J. Robert "Bob" Jansson

J. ROBERT JANSSON
District Forest Ranger

P. S. Enclosed is Jim's Forest Service key which Gary said you would like to have. This was a positive means of identification. He was not wearing his badge that day it is still among some other equipment. As soon as we locate it we will send it to you.

William J. Hellman

William J. Hellman
Kalispell, Montana

William J. "Bill" Hellman was born August 3, 1925 in Kalispell, Montana. So his 24th birthday was just two days before Mann Gulch---when you lucky four jumped into Yellowstone and the unlucky four, including Bill, returned to Missoula in time to catch the Mann Gulch fire two days later.

Bill would have graduated from Flathead County High School with the class of 1943, but he volunteered for the Navy at the age of seventeen. He served with the Navy for two years and then transferred to the Marines, being trained as a combat medical corpsman. As such he took part in many island-hopping invasions in the Pacific. He also served for a time in occupied Japan. Upon his discharge from the service, after his first summer of smokejumping, he and I were married on September 18, 1946, here in Kalispell, Montana. My name then was Geraldine Mather before I became Mrs. Bill Hellman. He enrolled in the University of Montana at Missoula, attended there for two years, then attended Montana State College at Havre, Montana, as well as Greeley State Teachers College at Greeley, Colorado. By the summer of '49 he had but three months of training to complete before he would have earned his degree. His plans were to become a science and botany teacher.

Bill also took part in the Forest Service ceremonial parachute jump as one of a select group of four experienced squad leader jumpers in front of the White House in Washington, D.C., on June 28,1949. He had been hesitant to go, as we were expecting our first child to be born any day; but we felt it was a great honor to be asked, so he did go and our son was born the day before his jump, on June 27,1949.

Bill's father, James Hellman, was also employed by the Forest Service, and did retire from the Forest Service. . .

. . . All the ones (smokejumpers) we knew were working in the summer for the money so they could go to school in the fall, winter, and spring; and most of them were going to college under the G.I. Bill program.

The only smokejumper that I knew that was killed along with Bill was Henry Thol, Jr. Henry and I grew up in the same neighborhood. Of course his father was terribly upset, especially with his knowledge [as a retired forest ranger] of working in the woods. . . . . Henry Thol, Jr., was a fine young man. He came from an excellent family.

I would like to say that Bill was a great husband, and I am sure he would have made a good father. I have been lucky again with my second marriage to another outstanding man. Of course I am prejudiced about all this.

(Written by Mrs. Gerry McHenry, Bill Hellman's widow, © by Starr Jenkins 1993)

"Bill Hellman was a veteran. He fought in the war. He didn't finish high school because of the war. When they came back, they either had to catch up or take these tests. (He continued school under the GI Bill). Bill and the other smokejumpers who went to school were pretty serious about that education. You didn't have a lot of money; all you wanted was that education so there wasn't a lot of things to do. He worked in the summer and went to school in the winter. We lived in those cute little trailers."

(Gerry Hellman McHenry, Personal Interview, 10\30\98)

"Philip McVey and Bill Hellman were close personal friends of mine, and in addition we all attended the University of Montana. During the summer (of 1948) I dated Hellman's sister-in-law, Justine Mather, and as a result I saw a lot of Bill and his wife Gerry on a social basis. McVey and I had a lot of interests in common, and spent a lot of spare time talking about what we hoped to accomplish after we graduated from college.

My oldest son Philip William Mathews was born on August 5, 1958, in Washington, D.C., and is of course named after McVey and Hellman."

(An excerpt from a letter written by Jack F. Matthews, former smokejumper, to John N. Maclean.)

Bill Hellman had served 5 seasons with the Forest Service and this was his fourth season smokejumping. In the Mann Gulch fire he was second in command. Bill was found, badly burned but still alive, about 200 yards below the ridge of Rescue Gulch. He died the next day in the hospital at the young age of twenty-four.

Bill Hellman is at the far right. This was taken right after his ceremonial parachute jump at the White House in June, 1949.

Photo taken by the USFS;
courtesy of Gerry Hellman McHenry

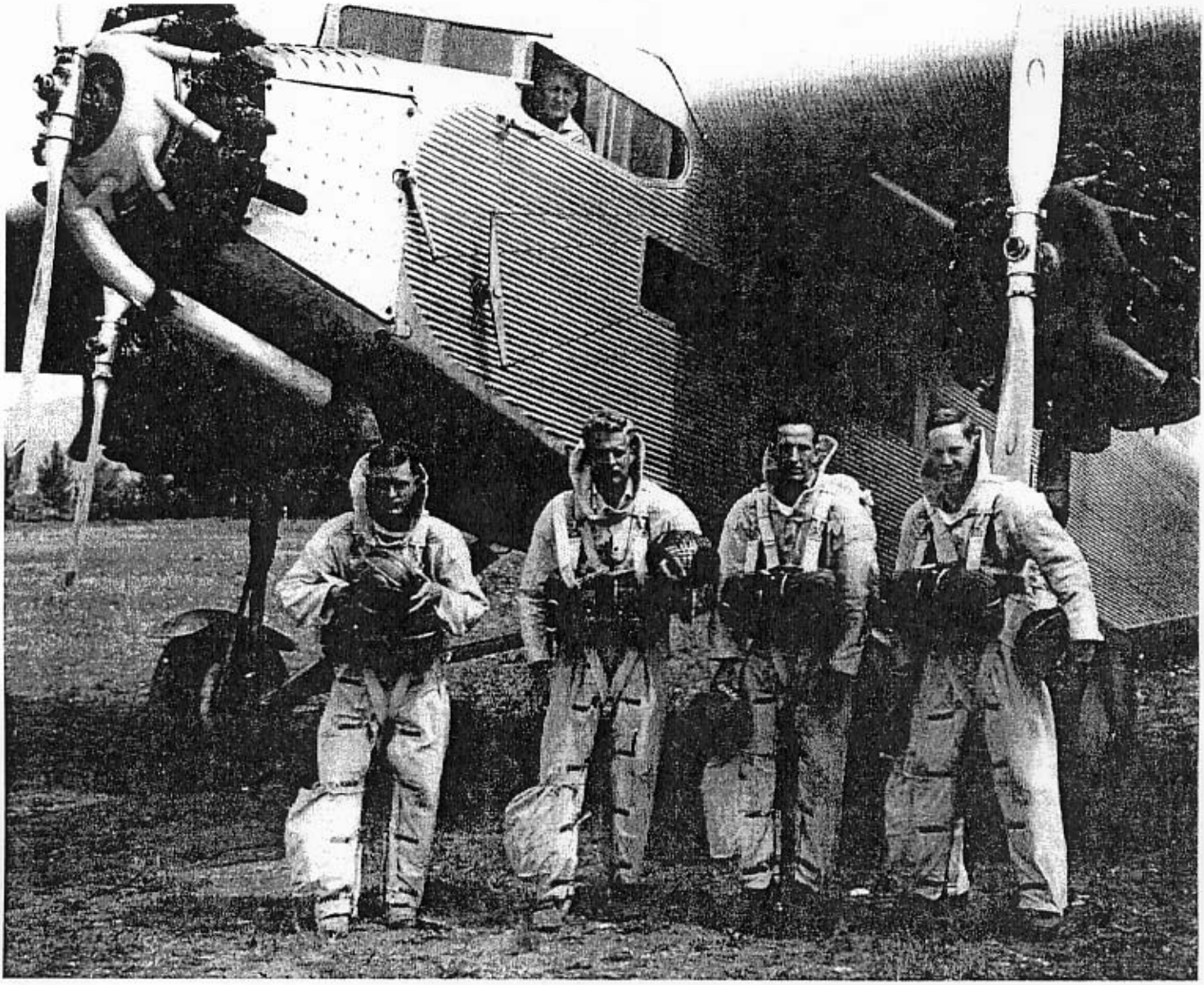


Photo taken by USFS Courtesy of Gerry Hellman McHenry

Bill Hellman is the third from the left. This group of smokejumpers was invited to jump at the White House in June, 1949.

Philip R. McVey

Philip R. McVey
Babb, Montana

Philip R. McVey lived in Babb, Montana at the time of his death. During his childhood, his family lived in multiple places along the Canadian border because his father was employed by the U.S. Immigration Service. Phil went to Browning High School. He joined the Navy before he graduated, so he was an absentee graduate. Phil served five seasons with the Forest Service and it was his second season smokejumping. Philip McVey was only 22 when he perished at the Mann Gulch Fire.

The following information about Philip came from friends and fellow smokejumpers.

I have only good memories of Phil McVey. His dad was with the U.S. Immigration Service and was assigned to the Northport, Washington border crossing. It was in Northport where Phil spent his junior high and some high school years. Many of us there were fortunate to have him as a friend.

Phil was always ready for a pickup game of baseball during those "long" summer vacations. If not baseball, he would think of other things to do. One very successful project that he initiated, at the age of 14, was to put on a "carnival" at his place. With the help of several friends, including my brother and me, we set up several carnival booths including a penny toss board, balloons and darts, ball throw at bottles, and bingo. Of course, this was all to make a little spending money so that we could buy firecrackers for the 4th of July time.

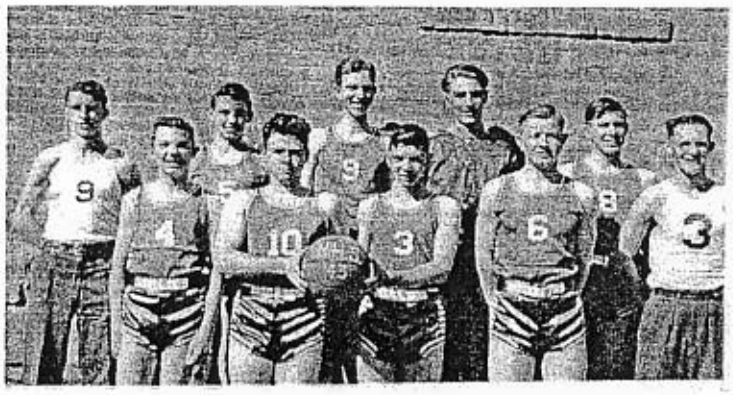
In the summer of '42, my brother was working at a farm near Grand Coulee Dam. Phil, 14, and myself, 13, decided to have a great experience. We would ride our bikes (no 3 or 20 speed in those days) from Northport to Grand Coulee to visit my brother, then continue on to Spokane and finally back to Northport. (A total distance of 400 miles) With "saddle bags" on the bikes and a bedroll we made a successful trip.

Phil's high school class was very small, only six people. He loved sports and participated in baseball and basketball. See the attached pictures from the high school annual.

Sincerely,

P. Clarence Ames

(The above letter was written by P. Clarence Ames, boyhood friend of Phil McVey.)



Phil McVey is #4

Phil McVey is at the far left

Phil McVey is at the far right

"I met Phil for the first time in the spring of 1948 when training started at Nine Mile, MT. He was older than me and he had been in the Navy.

I got to know Phil much better after our training was over and we were sent to a work project at the Castle Creek Ranger Station which is about 13 miles S.E. of Grangeville, Idaho. There were about 13 jumpers including two foreman that were in that group, and both Phil and I were in this same group. Our job on the work project was clearing trails, road, cleaning up slash areas that had been logged, anything that had to be done. We were always working together as a group, so many times Phil and I worked together doing something . . .

I'd like to say a few words about Phil. He was truly a good friend. He had a good sense of humor, was easy to get a long with and be around. He was a hard worker and always did more than his share. We were all in pretty good shape and Phil was exceptional and was proud of his strong, muscular body."

"This must be time for a break— on the work site. Notice the slash and standing dead snags in the background. We would cut these down with a two man crosscut saw. I'm on the left--Jerry Linton, then Phil with cigarette in his mouth, then Fred Koons, then George King with hat on.

"Going to or coming from work. We used the raft to get across the river. Phil is on the right holding the rope"

"This is Phil in the center. We are in a truck either coming or going to a practice fire."

The above pictures and quotes are from Jerry Linton. The pictures are taken near the Castle Creek Ranger Station and by the Clearwater River.

"Philip McVey and Bill Hellman were close personal friends of mine, and in addition we all attended the University of Montana. During the summer (of 1948) I dated Hellman's sister-in-law, Justine Mather, and as a result I saw a lot of Bill and his wife Gerry on a social basis. McVey and I had a lot of interests in common, and spent a lot of spare time talking about what we hoped to accomplish after we graduated from college.

My oldest son Philip William Mathews was born on August 5, 1958, in Washington, D.C., and is of course named after McVey and Hellman."

(An excerpt from a letter written by Jack F. Matthews, former smokejumper, to John N. Maclean.)

"This is a picture of Phil taken with his jump suit on, on the landing strip where our planes would land and take off."

Photo Courtesy of Jerry Linton.

David R. Navon

David Richard Navon
Modesto, California

My older brother, David Richard Navon, was born in 1920 in Argentina where my dad, already an American for many years, was selling farm machinery for International Harvester out of Chicago. My parents soon returned to the U.S. and bought farmland in the Central Valley of California where we were raised. After Dad lost the farm in the Depression, in 1935 we moved to the bigger town of Modesto where David finished high school in 1938. Seeking relief from the hum-drum, David "ran away to sea," working his way around the world for a year on a Swedish freighter. He returned in 1939 and entered Modesto Junior College, soon joining the National Guard to have some work income and military training. When President Roosevelt responded to Hitler's rampages in Europe by mobilizing the National Guard in 1941, David was taken into the Army. And the war soon came.

David made it through Officer Candidate School in 1942 and as a second lieutenant volunteered for paratrooper training. Eventually he was sent to England and was with the 82nd Airborne Division when it jumped into Holland in the fall of 1944 (at Nijmegen---as described in the book A Bridge Too Far). He was wounded in that battle and invalided back to England just before the Battle of the Bulge. After the war ended, having recovered, he was in the Army of Occupation in Berlin, attached to the 101st Airborne Division. When he was honorably discharged in March 1946, after five years in service, he held the rank of first lieutenant.

He then enrolled at the University of California, Berkeley, majoring in forestry. He spent the 1947-48 school year at the University of Aberdeen (Scotland) School of Forestry, and returned to California to graduate with his forestry degree in June 1949.

Our last meeting together was an outing to the San Francisco (De Young) Art Museum. David was a museum-goer, and a book-reader, and as long as I can remember he and my father kept a stamp collection. His letters home, from wherever he was in the world, usually had some beautiful stamps. . .

. . .David was intent on a career in forestry. He had taken the summer job---he said it was going to be the last jumping he would do---to earn money; he was sending me checks to help me go to Europe in the fall. He loved the outdoor life, and was serious about establishing himself. His letters were enthusiastic about parts of the Montana country he had seen, and about the fact that he had been given some real forest work to do, cruising timber. . .

(Written by Anita Navon, © by Starr Jenkins 1993)

One episode of the summer of '49 showed how serious Dave was about learning his forestry: Short Hall, of Colorado A & M (Fort Collins), had a war-surplus Jeep he had just bought. . . On a weekend he invited two other forestry-student jumpers, Dave Navon and Jock Fleming, and me to ride with him out to the Powell Ranger Station on the west side of the Bitterroot Divide; just into Idaho. Short Hall as always wanted to see some new, nearly untouched country; but he and the other two foresters also wanted to make that 100 mile drive to get into a watershed they had never seen before to get their first real look at a Western White Pine--the great wood for matches and toothpicks--important items for macho western men. I was along to enjoy the country too and to witness these three budding foresters' great enthusiasm when they spotted their first one. "There it is" "Yeah. Hey, ain't that neat!" A marvelous lumber tree that is getting harder and harder to find in our nation's dwindling forests.

I believe Dave told me he was planning to return to U.C. Berkeley to get a Master's degree in Range Management--to strengthen his qualifications for a Forest Service or other land management career. . .

(Thoughts written by Starr Jenkins)

David Navon had served two seasons with the Forest Service. This was his first year of smokejumping. At the age of 28 he was one of the older smokejumpers, but his life was abruptly ended by the Mann Gulch Fire.

David Navon gets checked out by Spotter Chuck Pickard for a training jump. Nine Mile Airstrip, Montana July of 1949.
(Photo by Starr Jenkins)

Nineteen jumpers, about to take off for their graduation jump, July 1949. Dave Navon is in the back row, fourth from the right. Photo courtesy of Peter Stackpole

Leonard L. Piper

Leonard Piper
Blairsville, Pennsylvania

Leonard L. Piper was born July 5, 1926 in Blairsville, Pennsylvania to Leroy and Fredericka Piper. Leonard's rather large family consisted of six boys and three girls: Garvin, Leonard, Linley, Gilbert, Clair, Donald, Thelma, Dorothy, and Marie.

"We lived on a farm when we were growing up. There was a lot of work that had to be done and Leonard always helped taking care of the animals and doing work in the fields along with his brothers. During harvesting time all the neighbors would help each other at thrashing time. Thrashing was a process of separating the oats and wheat grain from the straw. This was done by a large stationary tractor-driven machine taken from farm to farm where the oats and wheat were hauled from the fields to the thrashing machine. This took a lot of manual labor and neighbors helped each other by going from farm to farm to work. Leonard was always willing to help wherever he was needed.

The roads were not very good in the winter and we usually got a lot of snow and cold weather. We lived quite a distance from the main highway where the school bus stopped for my three brothers and myself. We took shortcuts through neighbors' fields and sometimes the snow was drifted and very deep. Many times Leonard would carry me on his back through the drifts. He was a loving and caring brother who looked after me--his little sister.

Leonard attended Sunday School and (Hebron Lutheran) Church regularly and had many friends and was well-liked by everyone who knew him. Our family had a lot of good times together and Leonard was always there to enjoy the happy times with all the family, friends, and relatives. Leonard enjoyed playing the guitar and making fudge. We enjoyed eating the fudge, which I'll admit was pretty good.

In his senior year of (Derry Township) high school, Leonard was chosen for a part in the senior class play. The family was all very proud of his performance."

(Written by Leonard's sister, Marie A. Liebel)

Scene from Meet the Folks. Leonard played the father and is standing.

Photo courtesy of Marie Liebel

Also during his senior year when our country was at war, Leonard enlisted in the Navy in January 1945 and served for 18 months.

"He couldn't finish the school year with his classmates, so on Graduation Day, my mother received his diploma for him. Leonard served our country and had two brothers who were in the service. Garvin was in the Army and Linley was in the Marines.

Leonard had a love for hunting and outdoor activities and decided to further his education by studying forestry. In the summer of 1947, we said good-bye to Leonard when he left for Montana to study at the University of Missoula. He became a smokejumper to help pay for his schooling."

(Written by Marie A. Liebel, Leonard's sister)

Leonard is on the right.
(Montana, 1949)

Photos courtesy of Marie Liebel

Leonard is on the left.
(Montana, 1949)

The family would never know that they would not see Leonard again. Leonard had not been home since entering college, but had considered a trip east to visit his family before resuming his studies in the fall.

On August 5, 1949 Leonard Piper died in the Mann Gulch Fire just north of Helena. Althea Piper (Leonard Piper's sister-in-law) shares as best as she can remember the events that took place after the fire on August 5, 1949:

August 5th *I believe this was a Thursday. There was a report on the radio during the 12:00 o'clock and 6:00 o'clock news. The report said that Smoke Jumpers had died in Montana. My husband, Garvin and I went to his parents home that evening, about three miles away, and not wanting to upset them until we knew more, we didn't mention what we had heard. And we didn't know at that time if Leonard was one of the Jumpers.*

August 7th *My Mother-in-Law, Fredericka (Grandma), had just finished having her kitchen remodeled. She had her kitchen set stored at our house. Her son Clair brought her over to pick up the set and at this time they still hadn't heard anything about Leonard. And not having heard anything either we still didn't want to alarm them.*

August 8th *About 8:00 a.m. Sunday morning as we were getting ready to go to Church, Bob Joynter, a local forester called. I answered the phone and he asked to talk to Garvin. After a moment I heard my husband say "Yes.....that's my brother". We decided not to go to Church, but Garvin went into town and left a note on the windshield of their brother Gilbert's car telling him to stop out after Church. They stopped in later. Gilbert, his wife Irene, daughter Myra, son Kenneth, and Marie, Leonard's younger sister, were all together and were planning to go to a reunion after Church. They all decided to go to their sister Dorothy's next and then to Grandma and Pap Pipers. All of these families were and still are within a short distance. Grandma Piper still had not heard. A lot of families at that time, like the Piper's did not have a phone. She thought at first with everyone coming in something was wrong and that it was her mother, Grandma Mikesell. Dorothy's husband Otto Gaskill went upstairs to awaken Pap. He was in bed since he worked night shift at that time for American Locomotive in Latrobe, PA. When Grandma Piper was told the news, she said that she didn't want Leonard to be a smoke jumper.*

We returned home to answer the phone and take messages back and forth. Leonard's sister Thelma and her husband Eli McDowell lived at that time in Helena, Montana. Leonard was living with or near, Thelma and Eli. Leonard's body was so badly burned that they identified his body by Thelma's house key. Eli's brother Lloyd identified the body.

There was some confusion about the arrival of Leonard's body, and later this was cleared up between Pap, Eli, and myself. Eli said that the information I gave Pap was correct.

August 12th *Leonard's aunt Marie Drum, Grandma Piper's sister, called and said that the Body arrived at 7:00 a.m. at the Latrobe railroad station. When she called she said, "The body is in."*

Viewing was that night and Saturday at Grandma and Pap Piper's house.
Funeral was Sunday at Hebron Lutheran Church.
Burial was Sunday at Bethel Cemetery, Stahlstown, PA

Photo courtesy of Marie Liebel

Picture taken just
after I landed on my
first jump in timber.

Leonard.

It was my fifth
parachute jump.

This is a copy of Leonard's own handwriting that was on the back of the original of this picture.

"We have always and will continue to remember Leonard as a kind and good brother who is still missed very much by all the family."

--Marie Liebel

Stanley J. Reba

Stanley J. Reba
Brooklyn, New York

Stanley J. Reba was born October 15, 1923 in Brooklyn, New York. Both of his parents, as best as I can remember, were Polish immigrants. His father, Walter Reba, was very conservative and strict, definitely the head of the household. Stan had an older sister, Catherine, and a younger sister, Adeline. Their address at the time of Stan's death was 96 Newell Street, Brooklyn. This was I believe the residence of Stan's boyhood.

I do not know where he attended grade school but he graduated from Brooklyn Boys' High School, a Christian Brothers School. He received a football scholarship to Holy Cross College in Massachusetts and took his freshman year there. It was at this time that he joined the Army Air Corps. He held the rank of 2nd lieutenant and served in the Pacific, Saipan being one area mentioned. He received the Purple Heart, but neither my sister Julie nor I know the details about how he earned this. Other medals he was awarded were the Asia Theater Medal, The Victory Medal, and the American Service Medal.

After the war Stan resumed his studies but this time at the University of Minnesota, School of Forestry. He began working summers with the Forest Service and began smokejumping the summer of 1948.

Stan met Julie sometime during the fall of 1947. (I was only eleven years old so I was not aware of my sister's social life then.) I do remember that during the summer of '48, while she was at home in our small town of Pierz, Minnesota, she was receiving letters from him, from Missoula, faithfully. (I was a nosey kid!) I believe he broke or sprained an ankle jumping that year. That fall, on October 30, 1948, my sister, Julie and Stan were married at St. Olaf's Church in Minneapolis.

Stan would have graduated from the University of Minnesota in Forestry in June of 1950. His dream was to build a career with the Forest Service in upstate New York. However, he loved western Montana too, and the area would have been his second choice of where to spend his life.

As it turned out, Julie and Stan's married life was brief-- nine whole months. They lived in a small trailer midway between Minneapolis and St. Paul---where Stan attended university classes. Stan was going to school on the GI Bill and they didn't have much money. Stan took jobs with the post office and other organizations during vacations (Christmas and spring break).

After classes were out in mid-June, Stan left Minnesota to go to Fort Eustis in Virginia for a six-week period of ROTC training. It was during this time, I believe, that he earned his commission in the Army as first lieutenant. My sister, who was living at our family home in Pierz while Stan was in the East, was able to spend a short time with him. It was a brief little honeymoon, the honeymoon they had never had, and they spent it in Atlantic City.

Stan returned to Minnesota at the end of July and, after a brief visit, joined with his good friend Joe Sylvia to go out to Montana to rejoin the smokejumpers for their belated refresher jump training. I remember vividly the morning of Friday, July 29th, when they were to leave us very early for the long drive to Missoula.

Our whole family, along with Joe and Stan, gathered in our big old-fashioned country kitchen for a breakfast of pancakes, bacon and eggs, homemade sausage, and pan-fried potatoes. I remember my dad asking Stan worriedly if smokejumping out on fires in the backcountry wasn't rather dangerous. Stan replied that no it wasn't---that he had survived World War II and that was certainly a lot more dangerous. I remember standing in the driveway watching Joe and Stan pack their things into the little Chevy my dad had given them to use. Those were final good-byes, although at the time we were totally unaware of such a possibility. (I still have the Marine Corps sharpshooter pin that Joe gave me the day before they left. I had admired it and he gave it to me. I wore it in his honor on the day of the dedication of the Smokejumpers' Memorial in Missoula two years ago.)

I don't know what Stan's last week of life was like except that I remember my sister receiving phone calls letting her know that he had arrived safely and had begun the usual refresher training for jumping. I learned that during that week Stan's mother had had a fearsome dream about him. The details of the dream I don't know, but it involved Stan's death. She was so frightened by the dream she wrote a letter to him to tell him to be careful. He never got to read that letter.

The weekend of August 5th was extremely hot in Minnesota too, as it was in Montana---the difference being only the humidity. Early Saturday morning (the 6th) my sister-in-law came to our house (before Julie was up) to tell my mother that she had heard a news broadcast on the radio telling of a bad fire burning between Helena and Missoula and that my mother should say nothing to Julie. I did remember Mother saying something aside to my dad, but for some reason we were all under the impression that Stan and Joe would have to complete a solid week (five days) of training before being jumped into a fire. Thus this bad fire near Helena would certainly not involve them.

My dad always listened to a 10 p.m. newscast before going to bed. That evening, August 6th, my sister came into the living room in time for the broadcast. The newscaster reported the bad Montana fire and the fact that a University of Minnesota student had died in the hospital that day. He gave his name: Joseph B. Sylvia. I can never describe the reaction of us all in the living room that night. We all started to cry and my sister ran to the phone and placed a person-to-person call to Stan. The reply was that he couldn't be reached, that he was "on call". A terrible likelihood filled us with fear: if Joe Sylvia had been on that fire so might be Stan Reba.

Thus began the all night vigil of August 6-7. The Smokejumper Center had taken my sister's number and about 2 a.m. they called and confirmed Stan's actual presence in that fire crew but said only that there were still ten jumpers missing and that there were three survivors, the names of which they would not give. We all thought that there was a shred of hope. Maybe it was just that we hoped beyond hope that he was alive.

My mother, dad, sister and I walked over to our nearby parish church about dawn, August 7, to pray. In our little town of Pierz, Minnesota, I can remember thinking that Stan just must be alive. Of course he had been dead for well over twenty-four hours by then.

The final call came about 2 p.m. Sunday. My dad answered the phone. From my bedroom I remember hearing this terribly strange sound. I ran out into the kitchen to see my dad standing there by the phone, just sobbing bitterly. In my years of life I had never

seen or heard my dad cry before! I realized, as we all did then, what the phone call had told us.

To conclude, some of my memories of Stan:

The first Christmas, the only Christmas, they were married, Stan gave me a little gold locket which he had picked out himself. Julie told me how he had wanted to select it himself with no help from her and that the suggestion of the locket as a gift was his idea, not hers. That beautiful locket was very precious to me, and I would still have it but for the fact that I put it in Julie's coffin when she died ten years later.

I remember visiting them, Stan and Julie, at Easter time, during my break from school. Stan was very busy at school, but took the time to take me to the Como Park Zoo in St. Paul. He also, during that visit, drove me a good distance, during an early spring snowstorm, to a Catholic church so that I could attend Good Friday services.

I remember later that spring, when I was very sick, Stan drove Julie to Pierz, a two-and-a-half hour drive, so they could see me. This he did in spite of having a heavy load of tests to prepare for that week.

Stan also taught me to eat the skin of a baked potato because "that was the most nutritious part."

Stan loved to listen to Tex Ritter and had an album of Tex Ritter with which he'd tease Julie by playing it over and over. She was <u>not</u> a Ritter fan, preferring classical and standard hits rather than country. But Stan loved to listen to my mother's records of string quartets, so he enjoyed some of the classical too.

Stan Reba, that burly, football-playing, smokejumping man, also loved poetry. One of his favorites, "Crossing the Bar" by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, was used on his prayer card when he was buried, at my sister's request.

I also remember that Stan wrote beautiful letters to my sister. I, of course, never read them, but I remember she read parts of his letters to me, years later, when I was first considering marriage to someone.

As I write this I can't help but think of how much richer our lives would have been had Stan lived, not only my sister's life, but our entire family's life. When Stan died, we not only lost a wonderful son and brother, but we also lost a wonderful daughter and sister. After Stan's death, my sister was never the same; she never remarried and ten years later she took her own life. Tragic events affect so many and have such long lasting consequences. Writing this has brought into focus, once again, the impact of that very tragic Mann Gulch Fire, August 5, 1949.

Written by Mrs. Andre Anderson@ Starr Jenkins 1993

Photo courtesy of Peter Stackpole

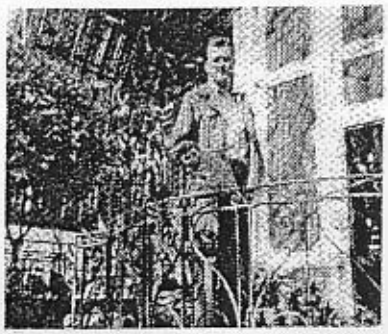


Photo courtesy of Mrs. Andre Anderson

Marvin L. Sherman

Marvin L. Sherman
Missoula, Montana

Marvin L. Sherman was 21 years old when he died in the Mann Gulch Fire on August 5, 1949. He lived at 717 Grant Street in Missoula, Montana. Marvin has many family and friends who miss him very much. They have written and sent us stories that they would like to share about Marvin Sherman.

This first story comes from a very dear friend, Tom Maggee, Sr. He has this to say about Marvin Sherman---

In regard to Marvin Sherman, Dick as I knew him. Dick worked for the U.S. Forest Service on the Lolo District from 1945 to 1949 if I recall correctly. Help was hard to get at the end of World War II. Young men and old alike did the job.

I met Dick through my two teenage sisters, as well as several other young men who were running interference. Dick was manning Mormon Peak Lookout about 7 miles from our ranch on Lolo Creek. I had a good saddle horse and the ranger gave me $10.00 to ride the telephone line and trail up to that lookout. It was like a vacation to me. I would talk my folks into buying me a case of beer; I'd put it on my saddle and head for Mormon Peak. While drinking warm beer Dick and I would clear the trail and maintain telephone lines. As the empty beer cans accumulated we would dig holes and bury them where the rangers wouldn't find them.

From that lookout you could look right down into the town of Lolo and see the Saturday night dance hall, The Rockaway. Sometimes we wished we were there and sometimes we were thinking, "Hell, we are already in heaven; why do you want to go down there?" The Forest Service had two burros, Gene and Ginny, which Dick usually had at the lookout to pack water. One could pack 20 gallons and the other 30 gallons. When he didn't have the burros, Dick would pack a 5 gallon backpack and two gallon water sacks one and a half miles from the head of Mormon Creek every two days.

My mother, Audrey, liked Dick very much. The huckleberries that year were real good, so we made a date to take my mom picking berries. There was a short route but it was too steep for my mom. After picking our berries we walked the remaining half mile to Dick's lookout. As the tower came into sight Mother said, "My God, does he live up there?" With the help of Dick and me we got her to climb the thirty-foot tower. After she got her second wind she said she wanted to cook Dick a good dinner. I had packed enough up there to feed ten people. Fun was had by all.

In 1946 I started to fly at the Johnson Flying Service, J-3 Cubs. Dick tried to talk me into smokejumping. I said, "Bull; if it's flying, I'm riding!"

In 1935 I got my first airplane ride at Hale Field, Missoula, Montana, at a penny a pound. Bob and Dick Johnson were the pilots.

Well sir, I say with deep regret that I moved to the Swan River Valley later in 1946, sawing logs with my dad, and I never saw Dick again, but we all loved him.

Ray Belston was Marvin Sherman's cousin and this is what he wanted to say about him:

Dick was not only my cousin, but he was also my buddy and my friend. Many a day we spent along the streams fishing togther in Big Hole and Bitter Root Valley. Many hours we worked together in the hay and grain fields, breaking a horse or branding a calf, or on the Bitter Root trapping the Mink and Muskrat together. I also spent many hours with Dick at the Lookout above Lolo when he worked for the U.S. Forest Service.

"Dick" as I knew him (Mr. Marvin Sherman) was a very dedicated person to his family, friends, and to the Military and the U.S. Forest Service. He was ready and willing to lay his life on the line, whenever and wherever the call came in. He did just that, Ladies and Gentlemen.

The next story comes from Franics Middlemist. She and her husband both knew Marvin very well and she even has a humorous story to share. It reads as follows. . . .

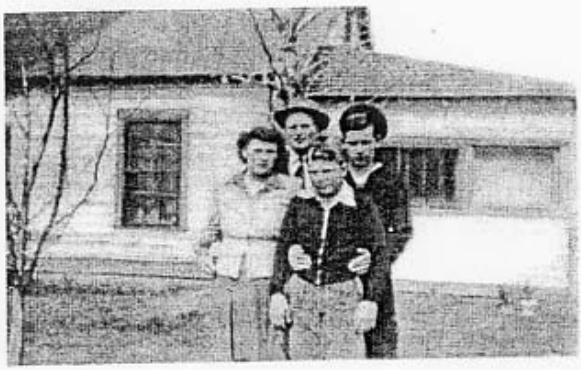
Marvin was a favorite with the men at the Lolo Ranger Station but especially with my husband Ross as they really enjoyed one another–working together, etc.

One day a pack rat was caught in a trap and Ross, Dick and a third party did not know how to kill it–so they decided to open the trap, dump the rat on the ground, and kill it with sticks. I was on the porch watching–you have never seen the hitting they tried to do with their sticks–but the rat darted here and there and got away. How I did laugh! Dick would talk to Ross sometimes about how he disliked what he was doing. Ross asked him why de didn't quit. He said he died every time he jumped, but he wanted to get married and he needed the money. When the Mann Gulch fire occurred, Ross felt as bad as if Dick had been his own son. Ross had also worked with Wag Dodge, their foreman.

Through the years Ross had opportunities to visit with Dick's mother. In fact, one of Dick's mother's hobbies was taking pictures. After Dick's death, that Christmas she enjoyed taking mayn pictures of our 3-year-old daughter.

Yes, Dick was one of Ross' favorite "boys" of his many, many years with the Forest Service.

Marvin's service was held at Lucy's Chapel on Wednesday, August 12, 1949 by Rev. M. J. McPike. He is buried at Darby Cemetery in Darby, Montana.



Family of Marvin Sherman at their Missoula Home (Mom, Dad, Dick, and his brother Jackie)

Marvin "Dick" Sherman and horse on his Cousin's Ray's Ranch in the Bitteroot, October 6, 1945.

Marvin Sherman and his wife to be Mary Ellen on Easter Sunday

Shortly before he was killed in the Mann Gulch Fire in 1949

All photos on this page courtesy of Ray Belston

Joseph B. Sylvia

Joseph B. Sylvia
Plymouth, Massachusetts

Joseph Sylvia (nicknamed "Whitefish") came from the East Coast. He was 24 years old and had three years with the Forest Service and two years experience as a smokejumper.

The following was sent in by Joe Sylvia's sister, Thelma Flanagan . . .

"Born Joseph Baron Sylvia on October 10, 1923, he was 3rd to the oldest in a family of seven--a happy-go-lucky sort. He enjoyed hunting, fishing, and living as we did in Plymouth, MA-- our back door to the ocean. He was a wonderfully strong swimmer. Our childhood was spent on the beach and in the water--the ocean.

Joe had lots of friends all through school and he was mediocre in his school studies, having many activities. There wasn't a lot of money while we were growing up, so there was always odd jobs to supplement our wants and needs.

Then in 1940, after graduation, Joe enlisted in the Marines. He saw plenty of action in World War II in various places. We had four brothers in the service (three in the Navy). They all managed to survive.

Joe went on to college at the University of Minnesota in St. Paul. His curriculum was Forestry. He used to send us pictures of all the beautiful acreage in the West. It's no wonder that he then experienced the training of a smokejumper and HE LOVED IT!!

Joe was a wonderful brother and amazingly we all got along in our family. We sisters always looked up to our brothers. Sometimes I can still see Joe in my thoughts, paddling in his home made kayak in Plymouth Bay."

Photo courtesy of Mrs. Andre Anderson

Joe as a marine on some island in 1942.

Photos courtesy of Thelma M. Flanagan.

Joe home on leave after the war in 1945 with his younger brother Al.

Joe at the University of Minnesota in 1949.

Silas R. Thompson

Silas Raymond Thompson Jr.
Charlotte, North Carolina

Silas Raymond Thompson, Jr. was born March 11, 1928 in Charlotte, North Carolina. He was the son of Mary Entwistle and Dr. Raymond Thompson. Raymond grew up in Charlotte, attended local schools, and graduated from Central High School in 1945. Immediately after graduating, he entered North Carolina State College in Raleigh, where he was a student in the Forestry School until June 1946. The summer of 1946, through North Carolina State Forestry School, he worked as a fire spotter atop Copper Butte Mountain in Washington State. Here was where he decided he wanted the "wilds of the west" and to attend Forestry School at the University of Montana in Missoula.

World War II was ending, and so was the G.I. Bill, so Raymond joined the Army to assure his college education. He enlisted in September 1946, was trained at Fort Bragg, North Carolina and was sent to Japan as a paratrooper with the 11th Air Borne. He was honorably discharged in February 1948, and armed with the G.I. Bill, entered the University of Montana Forestry School in March 1948.

Raymond joined the Smokejumpers at Nine Mile for the summer of 1948, continuing his education at the University in September. The summer of 1949, he had to attend U.S. Army camp for the first six weeks, then rejoined the Smokejumpers at the end of July 1949. Raymond was on call when the Mann Gulch Fire started and was a member of the crew. He died August 5, 1949 in the Mann Gulch fire at the age of 21.

Raymond always loved the outdoors; hunting, fishing, trapping, camping, hiking, skiing. He was a total non-conformist, a risk taker, who had a love of life and living, and was very much in touch with nature. He enjoyed life as he lived it.

(The above biography was written by Johan Newcombe, Raymond's sister)

Photo courtesy of Johan Newcombe

The following poem was written by Silas Raymond Thompson, Jr. His poem shares with us his passion for nature and the outdoors.

A WOODSMAN'S PRAYER

Let me breathe the clean pure air
That blows only in the wilder places
Send me far from the tainted cities
Packed tight with mongrel races.

Let me quench my thirst
In pure crystalline springs
That bubble from the living rock
Shadowed only by an eagle's wings.

Let me follow the untrod trail
Roaming freely till the end of my days
And watch the dusty red sun
Set the heavens and mountains ablaze.

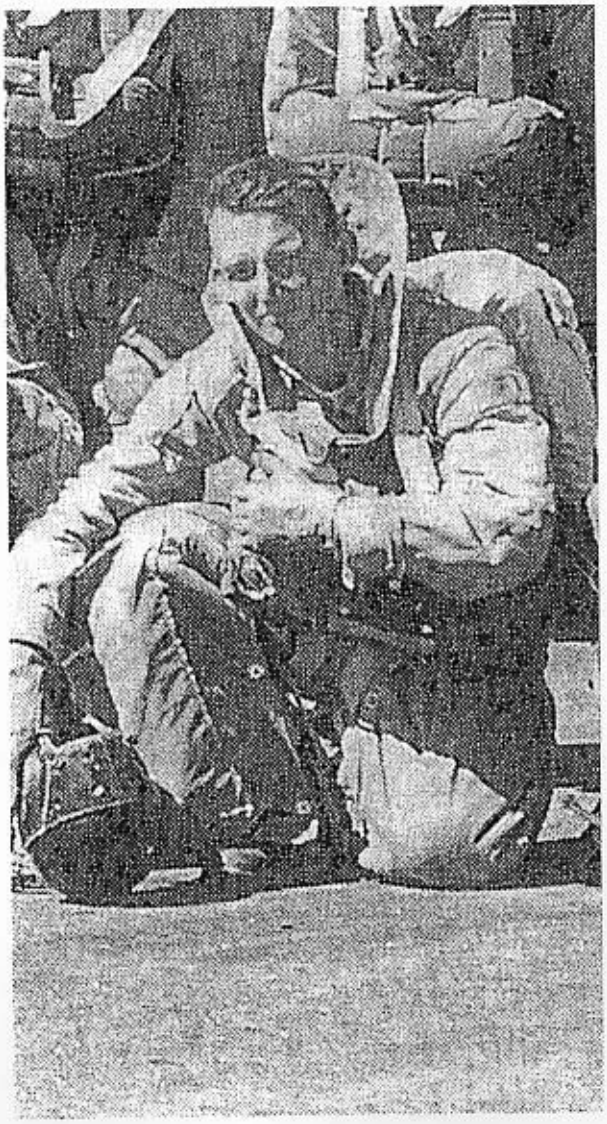
Let me, alone, eager and forever,
Follow and fight the naked wild
And when I die, mark me down
For what I am–Nature's Child.

---S. RaymondThompson, Jr.
1928-1949

Newton R. Thompson

Newton R. Thompson
Alhambra, California

Newton R. Thompson was 23 and a veteran. He had worked for the Forest Service for two years. This was his first season as a smokejumper.



USFS photo by Ernie Briscoe

Henry J. Thol Jr.

Henry J. Thol, Jr.
Kalispell, Montana

Henry J. Thol, Jr. was the son of a retired District Ranger. Thol was 19 years old and this was his first year as a jumper, but the second season with the Forest Service. On August 5, 1949, he was called off a roofing job along with the other members of the crew to board the DC-3 on route to Mann Gulch near the Gates of the Mountains.

"*Henry Thol was the kid who worked taking care of the grounds. He worked around the base.*" (Earl Cooley, Personal Interview, 10/28/98)

"He lived in the same neighborhood. (But) in those days, they stayed in their own little neighborhood. They lived on 2nd Ave. East and we lived on 3rd Ave. East--in the same block. We knew them (Henry and his brother) but they were younger--several years younger. His parents were good Germans." (Gerry Hellman McHenry, Personal Interview, 10/30/98)

"There was one thing that struck me about (Henry) Thol's cross (at Mann Gulch). At the base of the monument was a small flat stone, very old by the look of it, on which was carved a message. 'Henry. . .you. . .love. . .always. . .Sara.' Although the entire message was indecipherable, the emotion expressed in those few words moved me more than anything else I witnessed in Mann Gulch." (HHS Senior Tanner Jackson, IR Interview, September 1998.)

USFS photo by Ernie Brisco.

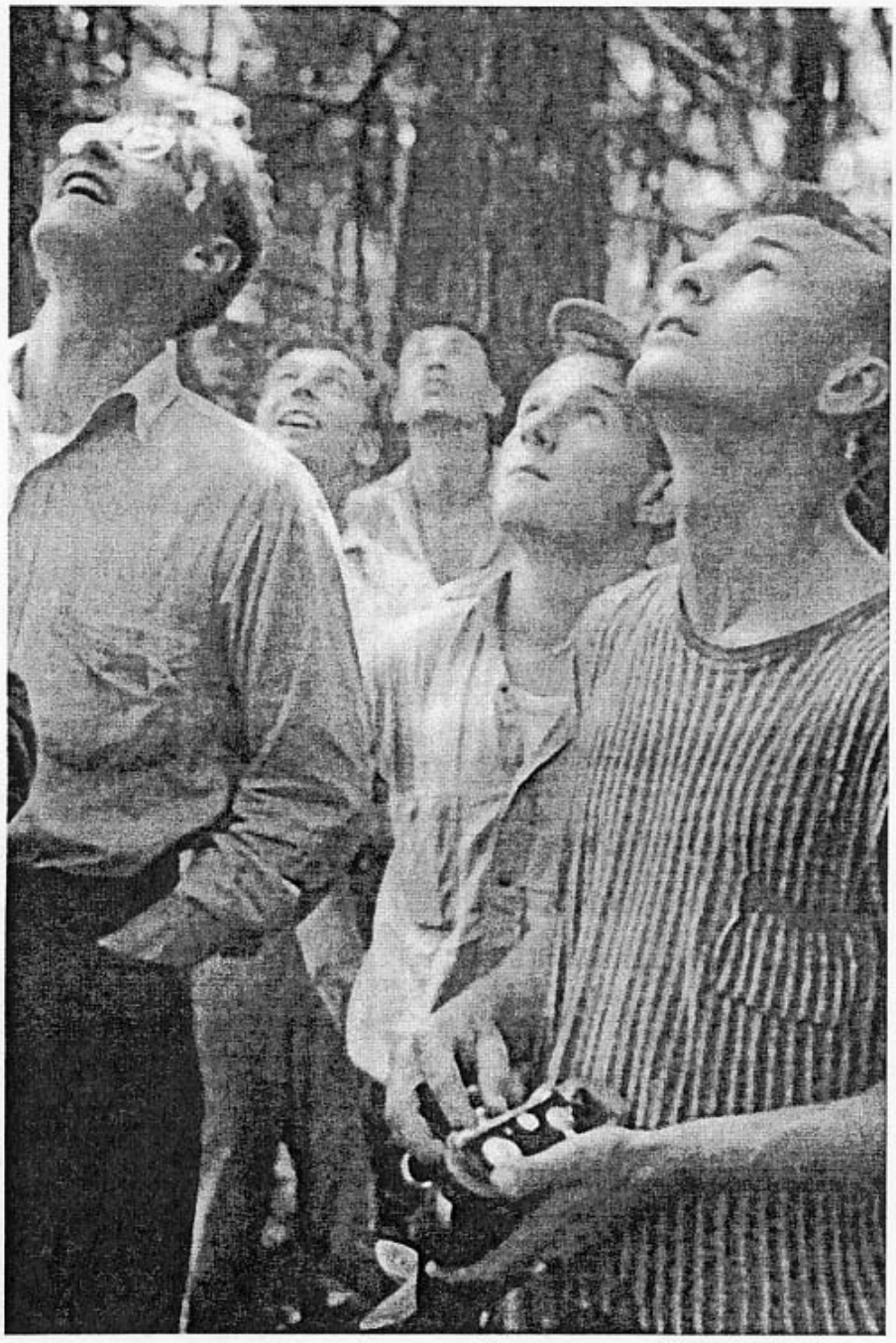
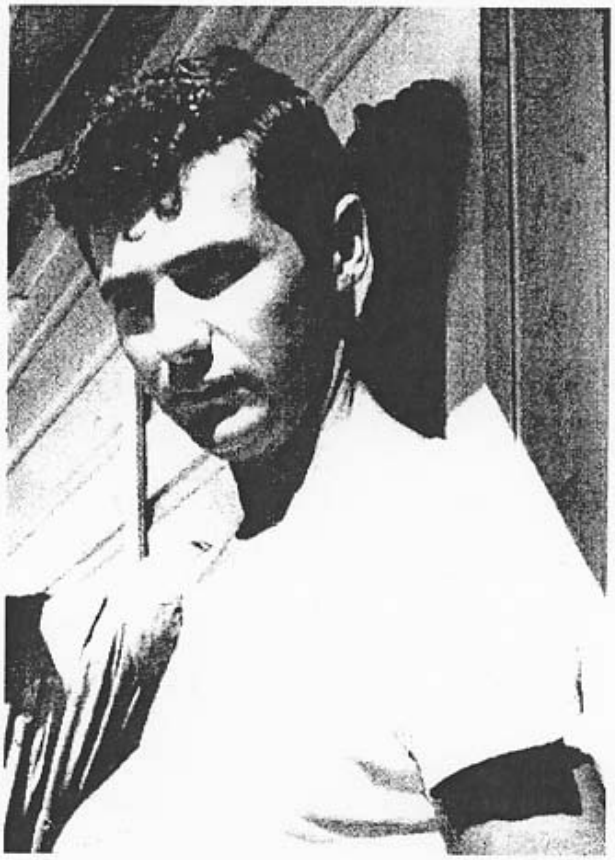


Photo courtesy of Peter Stackpole

Trainees watch others do high letdowns from a cable. Center man with the cap is Henry Thol, Jr.



Walter Rumsey

Walter Bliss Rumsey
Larned, Kansas

Walter Bliss Rumsey was born to Walter and Maud Rumsey on November 18, 1927, in Larned, Kansas. He was the second of three children including Mary Lou, his older sister, and Reed, his younger brother. Walt, as he preferred to be called, Reed, Mary Lou and their friends spent the Depression and Dust Bowl years fishing along the Pawnee Creek and Arkansas River, which were less than half a mile from their home. They hunted ducks, explored old Native American campsites in the area and made their own rafts to float on the water.

Walt was active in Boy Scouts and eventually earned his Eagle Scout award. During high school he worked in a greenhouse and decided then that he wanted to be either a forester or a farmer when he grew up. During high school he also took flying lessons and had earned his pilot's license by the time he left school at 17 to join the Navy.

Walt said he reluctantly left high school because he didn't feel it was right for him to be financially dependent on his mother since she was single at that point, and also he wanted to take advantage of the educational opportunities the Navy offered recruits during that time of war. He earned his GED during his short stint in the Navy and qualified for the G.I. Bill, which he used to put himself through college after the war ended.

Walt went to several colleges but eventually graduated with a double degree in range management and water shed in 1951, from Utah State University in Logan, Utah. During the summer of his junior year Walt worked as a smokejumper with the Forest Service based in Helena, Montana. That was the summer of the Mann Gulch Fire, which Walt survived along with Bob Sallee and Wagner Dodge. Walt was deeply grieved by the fire tragedy; in fact, he rarely spoke of it. It wasn't until the late 1970's, when Norman Maclean began writing the book, Young Men and Fire, that he shared the event in detail with his family. He went back to the site of the fire with Norman and Bob and found the tin can of potatoes Dodge had given him for Bill Hellman. Walt had opened it with his pocketknife and given the liquid from it to Bill during that horrible night while they waited for the rescue party. The discovery of the tin can, with the three distinctive slits in the lid made by his knife, corrected the Forest Service misunderstanding of where Bob (Sallee) and Walt came through the rocks and out onto the rock slide. They had actually run much further than what the Forest Service thought possible.

Walt and Mary Williford were married December 24, 1950. They worked for a farmer outside of Larned for a year and a half, but didn't feel there was a future for them, since they didn't see how they could get a farm of their own. Walt applied for and got a job with the Soil Conservation Service (SCS), now the Natural Resources Conservation Service. They moved to Utah, and began a career in the SCS, which lasted 28 years.

Walt and Mary had three children, Steven, Peggy (Bale), and Paul. Walt was a deeply committed husband and father and we had a wonderful family life. We moved about every four or five years, as Walt accepted promotions and transfers. We lived in Logan, and Richfield, Utah, Steamboat Springs, Colorado, Idaho Falls, Idaho, Albuquerque and Santa Fe, New Mexico, Boise Idaho and after we three kids had grown and gone, Walt and Mary accepted a transfer to Lincoln, Nebraska. They liked Boise best and hoped to retire there.

Walt's love of the outdoors was contagious and during a childhood of camping trips, hikes, fishing expeditions, whitewater rafting adventures, etc., all three of us developed a deep love for nature. Walt knew a lot about geology, botany, animal life, and wilderness survival. Spending time with him outdoors was better than taking a college course–he knew the names of all the plants we saw when we hiked, could explain most of the geology of the area and could tell you what animals had been around recently. He was always a careful, well-organized person, and despite hundreds of outdoor adventures neither he nor his family had any accidents or injuries. Not that there weren't any unexpected 'mishaps'–once he woke up with an animal in his sleeping bag with him. He tried to ease out gently, but a skunk shot out past him, then sprayed him thoroughly! That was bad, but what was worse was that he had to sleep in that same smelly sleeping bag the next night! Another time, he was floating the Missouri with friends where they camped on the beach without a tent. That night hundreds of frogs jumped and croaked their way over them on their way to the river, then back up the beach again in the morning. He laughed about experiences like that–it was all part of being outdoors and he took some discomfort in stride.

Walt was active in the Methodist church as well as community affairs all during his life. He led Boy Scout troops, participated in numerous church activities and while in Lincoln, was a Big Brother to a very lucky little boy. He felt it was important for him to reach out to others and at least set a good example. Walt was ecstatic to be a grandparent, and of course, his grandkids adored him.

Returning to Lincoln from a business trip in South Dakota, the commuter plane he was riding in went down during a thunderstorm on June 12, 1980, outside of Omaha, Nebraska. Fifteen of the seventeen people on board died. It felt to us like the sun had suddenly disappeared from our lives. Our beloved husband, father, and grandfather was gone. But like him, we felt we needed to set an example for others, and we have done our best to carry on his legacy of caring for nature and people. He is a role model and hero for our family and for everyone who knew him.

(This biography of Walter Rumsey was sent in by his daughter Peggy Bale.)

Walter Rumsey at Hale Field

Photo courtesy of Jack Nash

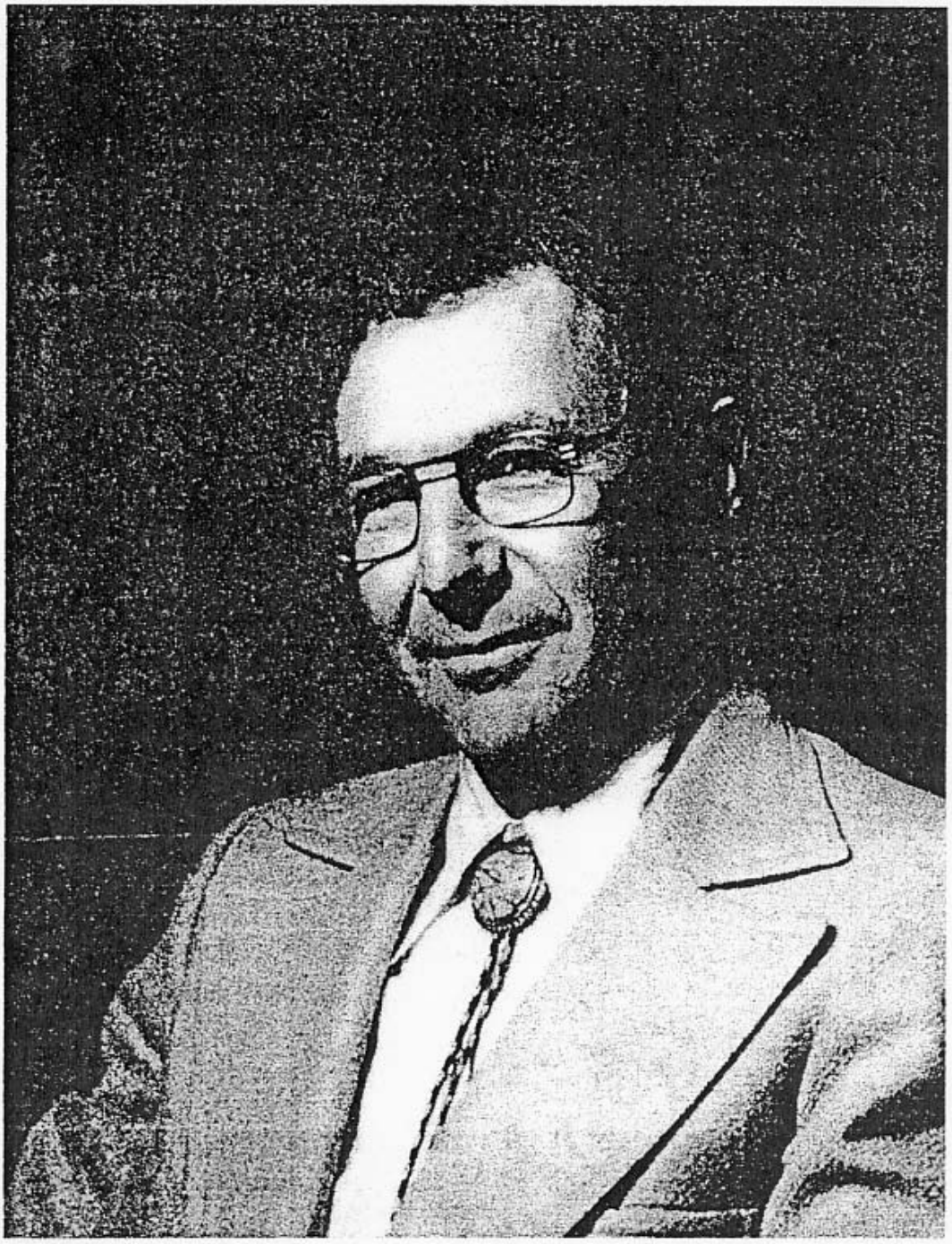


Photo courtesy of Peggy Bale

Walter Rumsey Jr. 1980

Robert Sallee

Robert Sallee
Survivor of the Mann Gulch Fire

Robert Sallee was born August 18, 1931 in Willow Creek, Montana. His Father was a farmer there until they moved to Vancouver, WA where he worked in the Kaiser Shipyard during WWII. After the war, the family purchased a dairy farm in Sandpoint, ID where Bob attended high school, graduating in 1949. While in high school, he worked for the Forest Service during his Sophomore and Junior years. He participated in what was referred to as the White Pine Blister Rust Control Program. The first year he spent in a camp pulling ribes (Gooseberry bushes) and also had the opportunity to work on several fires. His second year was spent on the White Pine Disease and Stocking Survey crew. It was an unusually rainy summer that year and he was not called for any fire control. The rain resulted in their crew not completing all of the assigned work so they were supplemented by two smokejumpers from Missoula. These men were the ones who provided Bob with the information he needed to apply to become a smokejumper.

During the summers of 1949 and 1950, Bob worked as a smokejumper–jumping ten times in 1949 and three times in 1950. After the seven training jumps in 1949, Mann Gulch was his first fire jump (jump #8). He left smoke jumping in 1951 to pursue a career in the paper industry.

After finishing his Business Degree at Eastern Washington University, Bob started out at Potlach Forest, Inc. in Lewiston, Idaho and then moved on to Hoerner-Waldorf in Missoula, Montana. While there, he advanced from Shift Engineer to Production Manager. From there he spent four years as a paper consultant with Sandwell International in Portland, Oregon. Sandwell gave Bob the opportunity to travel all over the world with projects in such interesting places as India, South Africa, New Zealand, France, Algeria, Norway, and Sweden.

Since leaving Sandwell International, Bob has worked the last twenty-two years for the Inland Empire Paper Company in Spokane, Washington. While there he has held the positions of Manager of Manufacturing, Technical Assistant to the President, and currently is the Director of Special Projects. He has delayed retirement to direct the design and construction of a new $100 million paper machine.

Bob's first wife, Alberta, died from cancer in 1990 after thirty-nine years of marriage. He and Alberta had two sons which have given him seven grandchildren. He has since remarried and has three stepchildren, who have nine children. This gives he and his wife, Bertie, a total of sixteen grandchildren in addition to two great grandchildren.

Bob's lifelong love of the outdoors is evident in his hobbies of hunting, fishing, boating, camping, hiking, and touring in the mountains. Until he lost his Medical Certificate due to Hypertension three years ago, he did a lot of flying and was licensed to fly single and multi-engine aircraft.

(Written by Robert Sallee)

Robert Sallee at Hale Field

Photo courtesy of Jack Nash

Our only direct personal remaining link to the 1949 Mann Gulch tragedy is Bob Sallee.

Wagner "Wag" Dodge

R. Wagner Dodge
Foreman of the Crew

Wagner "Wag" Dodge was the foreman of the Crew that was to fight in Mann Gulch located just north of Helena. He was 33 years old and a World War II veteran. Dodge had nine seasons of general Forest Service work which included firefighting. He had been a smokejumper for eight seasons, having started jumping in 1941.

Wag Dodge's former wife Patricia said that although Wag physically lived through the fire, he died that day. *"When a smokejumper friend drove Wag to our home after the fire, the first words he said to me were, 'The Old Boy upstairs has been riding in my hind pocket.'"*

Wagner Dodge dropped out of the smokejumper program the year following the Mann Gulch fire, but continued to work for the Forest Service in the Powell Ranger District. Just five years after the fire, he died at the age of 38 at St. Patrick's Hospital in Missoula of Hodgkin's Disease. At the time of his passing his bed was surrounded by family, relatives, smokejumper friends, and Bud Moore from Powell Ranger Station.

Many people have written about Wag Dodge. Some of their stories are included on the next few pages.

Photo courtesy of Pete Stackpole

Wag was a 'Friend of the Forest'

Your article on "Men of Mann" in the May 25 Missoulian reminded me (widow of R. Wagner Dodge, foreman of the Mann Gulch Fire) that I, too, remember a cross, made by smokejumpers out of parts of a Ford Trimotor, engraved "R. Wagner Dodge--1915-1955--Friend of the Forest." In a Ford Trimotor piloted by Robert Johnson, Wag's ashes were scattered over the remote Sand Creek area of the Powell Ranger District. Also, the cross was dropped. It was later retrieved and permanently set as a monument.

I quoted Bob Johnson, (Missoula Sentinel, June 2, 1955): "He, Wag Dodge, thought Powell Ranger District was the greatest place of all; he also believed the Ford Trimotor was the best airplane ever made, and we all thought the world of Wag."

Letter written to the Missoulian by Patricia M. Wilson

The next letter comes from Jim Wissler who lives in Missoula, Montana.

If the students are looking for a "HERO" to talk about from Mann Gulch, Wagner Dodge would be my first choice, the foreman on the ground. Wag tried to save his men with a backfire, but these were 17 to 24 year-old men who thought they were invincible. I wasn't at the Mann Gulch Fire, having left the forest service to attend art school in California, but I've often wondered if I'd have listened to Wag. He was an "old guy" to most of us, probably 30 to 35 years old, but he had the wisdom to get the crew through if they had only listened.

No one on that fire could have out run me; I was the miler on the track team and could run 3 hours without any trouble. But no living thing can outrun a fire, especially going up hill.

A former smokejumper, Jim Wissler

Wag Dodge's story also was of interest to song writer James Keelaghan. James wrote a song called Cold Missouri Waters. The song was inspired by Norman MacLean's book Young Men and Fire. *"I kept coming back to the image of Dodge, who survived the inferno, dying of Hodgkin's disease. Fate, which had saved him at 33, took him at 38."* James Keelaghan lyrics are as follows. . .

Cold Missouri Waters

My name is Dodge, but then you know that
It's written on the chart there at the foot end of the bed
They think I'm blind, I can't read it
I've read it, every word
And every word it says is death.
So, Confession
Is that the reason that you came?
Get it off my chest before I check out of the game.
Since you mention it, well there's thirteen things I'll name
Thirteen crosses high above the cold Missouri waters.

August 'Forty-Nine, north Montana
The hottest day on record; the forest tinder dry.
Lightning strikes in the mountains
I was crew chief at the jump base
I prepared the boys to fly.
Pick the drop zone
C-47 comes in low
Feel the tap upon your leg that tells you go;
See the circle of the fire down below
Fifteen of us dropped above the cold Missouri waters.

Gauged the fire, I'd seen bigger.
So, I ordered them to sidehill, we'd fight it from below.
We'd have our back to the river
We'd have it licked by morning,
Even if we took it slow.
But the fire crowned, jumped the valley just ahead.
There was no way down; headed for the ridge instead.
Too big to fight it; we'd have to fight that slope instead.
Flames one step behind above the cold Missouri waters.

Sky had turned red, smoke was boiling
Two hundred yards to safety, death was fifty yards behind.
I don't know why, I just thought it.
I struck a match to waist high grass
Running out of time.
Tried to tell them, step into this fire I set.
We can't make it; this is the only chance you'll get.
But they cursed me; ran for the rocks above instead.
I lay face down and prayed above the cold Missouri waters.

When I rose, Like the phoenix
In that world reduced to ashes there were none but two survived.
I stayed that night and one day after
Carried bodies to the river
Wondered how I stayed alive.
Thirteen stations of the cross to mark their fall.
I've had my say; I'll confess to nothing more.
I'll join them now, because they left me long before.
Thirteen crosses high above the cold Missouri waters;
Thirteen crosses high above the cold Missouri shore.

Robert Jansson

Robert Jansson
Priest Lake, Idaho

Bob Jansson was married when he was 26. His wife, Lois, was 22 at the time. Their wedding was postponed 3 weeks because Bob had to have an emergency appendectomy. After their wedding they left for the Canyon Ferry Ranger Station, where Bob built a little house for them. On October 3rd, 1942 Bob was classified 4-f by the military and left for Oceanside, California to serve. His wife, Lois, at that time was six months pregnant. Since Lois was so late in her pregnancy and couldn't travel, Bob was allowed to go home before their baby was born. Their first child arrived December 27, 1942. Bob and Lois named her Ruth. She only weighed four pounds, 10 ounces and had to stay in an incubator for 12 days before they could take her home. Their next child was born July 1, 1945. They named him Paul. Roger, the youngest, was born on September 18, 1948.

In August 1949, Bob was called to the Mann Gulch fire. The following is taken from Bob Jansson's report to the Forest Service.

> *. . .I turned around and started to walk down gulch in the burned spots and crossing the lightest burned edges. The fire now was swept by me and I decided it was now time to run. I got a couple of whiffs of the smoke and gas in the streamer and I then realized there was no breathing that stuff as one more whiff could knock a man out or cook his lungs. I had a space of fairly cool air, so I got set and started to run. There was now a high wall of flame in the timber clear to the bottom of the gulch on the south side and it was also cleaning out the gulch pretty fast. The whirl was now continuous and was practically upright. My position was in the vortex which was rapidly narrowing. I held my breath as I crossed the wall. There was no flame—just superheated air and gasses and a lot of reflected heat from the crown fire. I conked out from a lack of oxygen and fell on my left elbow, causing a bursitis which later caused my arm to swell down to the wrist.*
>
> *I came to in a few seconds; the back creep of the fire was but a few feet from me. I pulled a few yards out of the area and watched the fireworks, and vomited and retched from the effects of the whiffs of smoke and gas I had breathed.*
>
> *We had bad luck as I feared; probably had lost several 1000 acres of our scenic wilderness and I felt sick about it. I then thought about the sound I thought I had heard, but finally definitely put it out of my mind as being imagination. I figured anyone who might have been in upper Mann Gulch would have recognized the symptoms and pulled out long ago.*

I went back to Judge Padbury's boat. They were mighty relieved to see me as they felt sure I had been burned up in the fire. I said to Fred, "Let's go back to Meriwether as we can't do anything here."

Bob had a very difficult time dealing with the consequences of the fire. It caused much stress on him and haunted him for the rest of his life. The following excerpt was taken from Have You Ever Stopped To Wonder? by Lois Jansson. It describes Bob's actions when he came home after the fire.

Bob came home Sunday afternoon for a twenty-four hour rest, so tired and unstrung he hardly seemed like the husband and father we knew. I knew the children were frightened and I couldn't do much for them because I was frightened, too. His feet were in terrible shape, swollen so that it was very hard to get his boots off, and the socks—glued on by running blisters, had to be soaked off in the bathtub. After the second tub of water (the first one was absolutely black), he called me in and asked me to burn his shirt and undershirt. I started to protest, unthinking, that I could wash them, and he nearly shouted, "Burn them, they smell of death."

Then he asked me to wash his hair, which smelled the same, and he was too weak to do it, as he sat in the tub. I soaped and lathered his head twice, but to him the smell still persisted. Eventually, we burned all the clothes he had worn, including his hat, but he could still smell the odor. I thought this was his imagination until I got a whiff of the leather watchband he had worn when he sat with his arm around Joe Sylvia trying to keep him warm; it had a terrific odor, so we burned that, too.

What shall I tell of that long, strange night? Ruth and Paul were so upset they couldn't settle down, and to my sorrow, I finally had to spank them to make them stay in bed. They both cried themselves to sleep. Bob seemed to need help to get into his pajamas and into bed, and then he said, "I don't want you to sleep with me," and turned his face to the wall. Hurt and anxious, I lay down on the davenport in the living-room, but he called so many times for water, which he drank in great, gulping swallows as though he couldn't get enough of it, that I soon moved the scatter rugs, a sleeping bag and pillow, and made up a pallet on the floor beside him. Even Lassie, with that family telepathy she always showed, went moaning around and around the house. Fearing she would awaken Bob, I let her in and she settled down to sleep at my feet. Then Bob began to moan and finally to scream and call in agony, "Go away, go away!"

Toward morning he went into a deeper sleep and when the station began to stir, I put a pillow over the phone, pasted paper over the doorbells, begged the children to keep quiet, and he got some real good rest. This revived him and he seemed quite himself when he went back to the fire. But the screaming nightmares continued and so, by the end of the month, Dr. Morris said he must take time off or risk a nervous breakdown. We left Ruth and Paul with Lois Hiltabrand, the nurse kept Roger again, and we caught the train to Medora, North Dakota to attend Lloyd and Jean's wedding. Bob slept sixteen hours a night, the sleep of complete exhaustion. My folks had a service station and we had one of their tourist motel units to ourselves which was fortunate, as the night yelling was sometimes very distressing.

After 2 years, the Mann Gulch fire still plagued Bob's mind. Worried about his health, the Janssons transferred to the Priest Lake Ranger Station, Idaho. The last thing Bob did before they left was burn the uniform hat he wore at Mann Gulch and a jacket he wore later when he went up to Mann Gulch.

Later Bob found out that he was being investigated for being a communist, and that the investigation had been ongoing for eighteen months. He learned that his file was a couple of inches thick and had a red flag on it. While the red flag was on his file he could not be promoted nor transferred. It was nearly two years until the red flag was taken off his folder.

Jansson continued to have ongoing health problems. In August 1954 he was diagnosed with polycystic kidney disease which is a rare, incurable disease that usually is triggered by stress. The doctors told him that he had about fifteen tough years to live. It was eleven years later in November of 1965 that his struggle ended.

Photos courtesy of the Jansson family

Earl Cooley

Earl Cooley
Missoula, Montana

Earl Cooley was born forty miles northeast of Hardin, Montana, along Sarpy Creek where his family owned a ranch. His father also was a director of a small band in Hardin. Earl Cooley would most likely still be on this ranch, but his father had to sell it to pay off creditors for unpaid loans at the bank. Earl and his family then moved to a small farm in the Bitteroot Valley near Corvallis, Montana. There he enrolled in high school at the age of 12 and attended through freshman year, but since Earl was so small he took two years off and worked on the farm. He then went back to Corvallis High School and graduated in 1930 with nine letters in athletics. For the next couple of years he worked on various farms until he decided that farming wasn't for him.

"Earl Cooley Began his career as a laborer on a road crew in June, 1937 and retired as a regional fire equipment specialist in region headquarters in Missoula in June 1975. His experiences along the way included that of fireguard, lookout, timber cruiser, timber sale forester, equipment operator, powder man, truck driver, jackhammer operator, packer, and all phases of firefighting, from laborer to fire boss. He shares his experiences as district ranger on the Red River District in Idaho and the Noxon District in Montana. He introduces us to some of the pleasures and problems of managing national forests, which included the famed and rugged Salmon River, "The River of No Return," and the Cabinet Wilderness. His richly stored memories of co-workers and those hardy families who lived in remote mountains and valleys add to our enjoyment of this history, and our understanding of how people have helped shape the past and present of the Forest Service.

If Earl was asked to name the work that has been most important to him, he would surely cite his years with the smokejumper project. He can be justly proud of his achievements in the development of the Aerial Fire Depot in Missoula. Earl served in every facet of this project. He was a jumper, a parachute rigger, squad leader, foreman, fire control officer, camp superintendent, and superintendent in charge of the smokejumper base . . ."

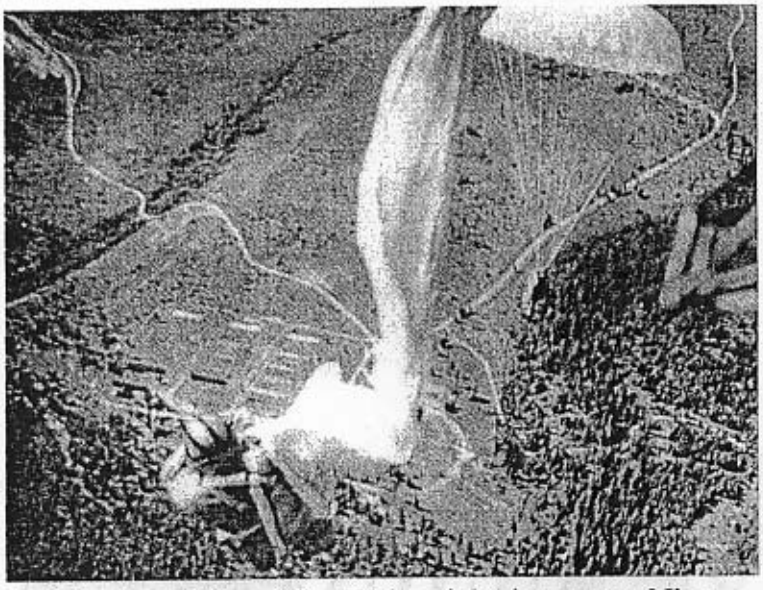
(Taken from the Foreword from Trimotor and Trail, copyright 1984, Earl E. Cooley)

Earl worked his way through forestry school in 1940. On July 12, 1940, he participated in the first operational fire jump on Martin Creek in the Selway Bitterroot Wilderness. During the Mann Gulch fire, Earl was a spotter for the plane that dropped the fifteen smokejumpers into the fire. After the drop, Earl returned to the office and remained there through the night.

> *"I had to stay in the office; everyone called in* (To find out who was on the fire). *I was the only one who knew where they were. I was the only one who could tell them where they were. . ."*
>
> (Earl Cooley, Personal Interview 10/28/1998)

Earl traveled back to Mann Gulch on August 6 to help identify those who had perished in the fire.

Earl spent 24 years with the smokejumpers and retired in 1975 after 38 years with the U.S. Forest Service. He is now retired and lives in Missoula, Montana.



Earl Cooley, left, and Jim Waite, right, jump over Nine Mile base in 1941.

Photos courtesy of Earl Cooley.

The first to make an actual fire jump, Rufus Robinson, left, and Earl Cooley, right , at the Aerial Fire Depot, Missoula, in the 1970's.

Conclusion

After spending the day reliving the events of August 5, 1949, our class drifted into small groups as we hiked down Mann Gulch toward the Missouri River. The conversation shifted from what we had seen and discussed on the rocky ridge above to our camping adventures the night before. However, every now and then each group lapsed into extended periods of silence as we carefully picked our way down the steep, rugged landscape. It was apparent that the days' excursion had left an unforgettable impression upon each of us. We seemed to need the erie silence to ponder the events, the tragedy, the story that had transpired on this hillside 50 years ago. The Mann Gulch saga touched the lives of yet another group of young people (and their teachers).

"Before making the breath-taking trip to Mann Gulch, it was just another assignment: we read books, researched, and interviewed people. But as we walked up the slopes of the gulch our bodies cried for mercy like those of the sixteen men. When we sat by the crosses, our lives changed forever."

Martin J. Kuhl

"I've gained a greater respect for what firefighters do, and for the people behind the scenes."

Karolina Topolski

"I really felt like I made a personal connection with the fire fighters that died."

Dana Deininger

While working on the Mann Gulch project I have developed a great respect for smokejumpers and fire. Before this project I knew nothing about smokejumping and had never even heard of Mann Gulch. Through this project I have found out about how many people the fire and the deaths have impacted. The lives of the families of the smokejumpers that were in the Mann Gulch fire will never be the same.

Kim Tallent

"The most impressive part of the (Mann Gulch) project for me was how much information we have gathered. We not only found the true story, but also discovered the personal stories about the smokejumpers."

Mac Mullette

"Mann Gulch has been a great learning experience. It was very emotional to see the pictures of the men. We have all learned a lot about fire, fire behavior, and the men who fought on this very tragic fire."

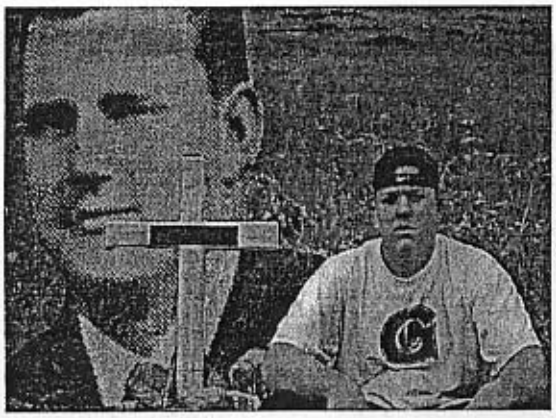
Val Platts

"Upon arrival on the actual historical spot, it was all instantly changed to an individual personal project mixing spirit and compassion for the victims. This experience was very emotional with the medley of a truly beautiful landscape, on-site excursion, and a tragic story of true-life heroes, killed within feet of places I lingered."

Kit Watson

"Mann Gulch was a great experience for me because I got to go back to 1949 and live what these guys experienced. I will never forget it."

Nate Boyd



"After reading the book and all of the (related) information about (Mann Gulch), it was helpful to actually see what we had read about."

Mike Grevas

"I think the most important thing is that now we have a link to something that will be around much longer than we will."

Nate Warner

"I didn't get to hike Mann Gulch; I did get the emotional feeling when we went to Missoula. There I saw a picture of my (adopted) smokejumper, Marvin Sherman, and the memorial with his name on it."

Crystal Warsinski

"It was especially hard for me because Dave Turner talked about something that hit really close to my own home ground, because I too had suffered the loss of a family member."

Jenny Gambill

"I gathered the information from the friends and family of the firefighters, which I truly loved. They have become friends of my own and have shared their personal stories with me."

Ashley Finnegan

"Mann Gulch was a tremendous learning experience for me. ...I have developed a huge appreciation for these 13 men."

Greg Dorrington

"I don't believe that Mann Gulch really affected me until our trip up to the gulch. It made me start thinking about what an amazing feat it was to out run that fire."

Stephanie Abraham

"I feel much closer to my classmates and will honor the bond we have shared through this tragic experience in history".

Heather Paulson

"I always had kind of known about Mann Gulch, but not so in depth as I do now--with all the research, writing, and actually going to the location. With going so in depth I soon realized how tragic and historic the story of Mann Gulch really is."

Kurt Michels

"The 50th year remembrance should be a reflection of how important the jumpers really were."

Allyson Hammill

"From the very beginning, Mann Gulch was special: a chance for average high school kids to participate in and contribute to a cause with historical national standing. We were interested, then intrigued and finally, enraptured. Mann Gulch left its mark on all of us."

Tanner Jackson

The Gates of the Mountains and Holter Lake has long been a favorite of our family for boating, camping, and fishing. For years, all we knew of Mann Gulch was what you could read on the sign by the river and the names on the memorial plaque at Meriwether Picnic area. In fact, if you tried to look up the gulch from the river it was hard, if not impossible, to see where this horrific fire had been.

The first real connection I had with the true story was reading Norman Maclean's book, Young Men and Fire, along with the rest of the X-Cel class. Then we visited Mann Gulch. Probably one of the most poignant moments was walking the hillside and visiting the crosses and granite stone (which I had not known existed) marking where the young men died. We had heard their story only moments before from Dave Turner (Forest Service). It was a very powerful, moving, and emotional experience for me. Here is where I truly became attached to and wanted to know more about these young men who had lost their lives. The project suddenly dealt with real people I could envision--some had been the same age as my own dad, who also fought in the war, had parachuted out of planes, and went to school on the GI bill during this same time. As I got to "know" the boys through other personal stories (from family and friends) that were sent in, it became more and more evident they were much like my own parents.

The Mann Gulch story is fascinating and tragic--and there are so many other stories that can be told because it happened. The most amazing thing to me has been the people--family members and friends--who have responded so graciously in sharing with us the lives of these young men. They obviously touched many and there is a great need to remember them and who they were . . .

---Becky Stuker
X-Cel Advisor

Mann Gulch

Ashes of a time past

Fire i**N**tense, surprised them all

NAVON, BE**N**NETT, DIETTERT, HELLMAN, HARRISON, AND THOL

Wa**G** Dodge, Rumsey and Sallee

mirac**U**lously survived.

crumb**L**ing white crosses

M**C**VEY, PIPER, REBA, SHERMAN, SYLVIA, AND THOMPSONS 2

Images **H**aunt me

May 9, 1999

My Reflections on Mann Gulch:

On several occasions through the years I have taken the "Gates of the Mountains" boat tour, viewed Mann Gulch from a distance and momentarily listened to the story of the 13 young men that died on August 5, 1949. As the boat continued the tour and the I lost visual sight of the gulch my thoughts would turn elsewhere again, not giving a second thought to what had happened on that mountain.

That all changed the day I sat on the hillside next to the crosses marking the location of the bodies of the firefighters. Unknown at the time I sat exhausted near Sylvia rock unable to continue my climb up the slope. As the story unfolded that day and through my continued research each firefighter became a mark in the history of time.

I cried many times as I learned of the personal experiences each young man had prior to the fire. My heart ached as I read and heard stories from the families of the young men. Heartfelt compassion enveloped me as came to know how the experience affected the families even to this day, 50 years later.

I learned the affect the tragedy had not only upon those young men, but others who were involved in the rescue effort. I learned how fate seemed to follow even those that survived.

Today I cannot think about Mann Gulch without a lump in my throat, tears close to the surface, and a deep appreciation for all those people whose lives were drastically affected by the fire.

My wish is that our efforts as a group will bring peace and healing to those who are still feeling the adverse affects of the tragedy.

My life has definitely been changed through learning and reliving those fateful days.

Lee Holmes - X-CEC ADVISOR

My personal feelings after having visited Mann Gulch

by

Rod Boyer

Having been married at The Gates of the Mountains and having a brother-in-law who was the recreation guard at Meriwether Picnic area, I have been familiar with the Mann Gulch story for some time. When Norman McLean's book Young Men and Fire was published my son David and I backpacked into the gulch from the back side to try to envision the tragedy. At this time I began to realise what a terrible event had occured nearl 50 years before. However, it was not until X-CEL hiked into the gulch and listened to Dave Turner's tale of the story that I began to identify with the boys and their tragic demise. Being able to connect with the boys through personal accounts shared by friends and family made them all too real and I was quite uncomfortable at times and felt as though I was disturbing their peace. This experience has changed my life in ways I cannot even describe and I will always share a part of myself with the thirteen young men who died that day.

My Mann Gulch Experience

We headed downstream from Merriwether campground to the mouth of Mann Gulch where we met two forest service employees who would be our Mann Gulch guides. One of the guides, Dave Turner, explained some of the area's history as we started to walk. One mile in we reached a plateau that provided a good advantage point for us to see all of Mann Gulch. As we sat and listened to Dave tell the story of the famous fire, it started to thunder and rain lightly around us. During Dave's account, I became so involved I felt as if I was there with the smokejumpers--almost compelled to jump up and try running to the top of the ridge, racing the fire as the young men had tried to do. As Dave was finishing up, the rain subsided and the sun broke through the clouds, making us feel warm again.

When the retelling was finished, my colleagues handed me a digital camera and asked, "Could you go take pictures of each student with their smokejumper's cross?" I agreed and in less than two hours I had seen where each young man had died, and also witnessed my students' reactions to their deaths. In addition to capturing their response on film, I have also committed these young faces beside white crosses to memory.

--- Bill McGraw

Missoulian online

Remembering young men and fire

By LESLIE McCARTNEY Lee Montana Newspapers

Helena High School students research Mann Gulch for listing as national historic site

HELENA - Had he lived, smokejumper Joseph Silva would be 74 years old. Staring from a faded picture dressed in a military uniform he resembles high-school senior Tanner Jackson, minus the hair streaked with yellow.

Jackson, who is roughly the same age as Silva was when he died, sees the similarity, too. "We look the same," he said.

Silva was one of 13 men who died in the Mann Gulch fire almost five decades ago. Now their lives, and agonizing deaths, have made an indelible impression on 21 teen-agers involved in a unique project at Helena High School.

Aug. 5, 1999, will mark the 50th anniversary of the tragedy.

"It changed dramatically the way wildland fires were fought," said Forest Service archaeologist Carl Davis.

"We felt we needed to give formal recognition and protection to the landscape."

With limited resources, the Forest Service sought help. Enter the X-Cel class at Helena High, which had collaborated with the agency in marking trails in past years.

Thus the task of researching and documenting the significance of Mann Gulch to formally nominate the site for the National Register of Historic Places was embraced by the teen-agers and teacher Lee Holmes.

Although the students and Holmes weren't prepared for was the impact that hours of research and learning about the lives and deaths of 13 young men brought about. "It has come alive for them," Holmes said.

Heather Paulson, a 16-year-old with a pierced eyebrow and a cloud of brown curls, recounted a memorable experience from early in the research.

On a fitfully hot September day, the entire class and seven chaperones spent the night near the site in the Gates of the Mountains Wilderness. They scouted the area, and even tried running up the gulch with 75 pounds of 1940s-style smokejumper equipment.

Students hurried up the gulch, weighed down by equipment, imagining they could outrun a hungry fire.

"It was literally impossible," Jackson said.

Then came a lecture by forester Dave Turner. As he began to talk about the events on a stifling day nearly 50 years ago, clouds and lightning closed in to create a backdrop.

They heard about a fire that at first appeared to be a routine 60-acre blaze, just off the Missouri River. And how the fire had blown up in the dry grass and 100-degree heat, chasing the young men up the side of the gulch.

They heard how 11 firefighters perished in the conflagration and how two others lingered in unspeakable pain for two days before they died.

After hearing of the bravery and tragedy of that day, the students walked silently around the 13 white crosses that dot the hillside of Mann Gulch, touching each one.

"It was eerie," Jackson said. "We got up, stood back and realized that these were real people."

"Some of these men were 17, 18, 19 years old," Holmes said. "The same age as most of the young men and women in this class."

The moving experience had a bonding effect as well, both Paulson and Jackson noted. The 21 classmates who trekked into the gulch came back as friends.

Back at school, they dug into history. They read "Young Men and Fire" by Norman Maclean, they wrote obituaries for each of the men and dreamed up an idea for a video documentary, which will be shown later this year.

They took a field trip to the smokejumper training center in Missoula and listened to a firsthand account by Earl Cooley, who was jump master for the Mann Gulch fire. They have studied newspaper accounts of the fire and pored over Forest Service documents.

They have touched seared metal containers from the firefighters' last meal and the smashed

radio that left the firefighters cut off from all communication. They have studied firefighting techniques, and read accounts of the rescue mission and the fire itself.

They studied rocks, trees and landscape. Survivors' stories were intermingled with obituaries. Seemingly fearless teen-agers wrestled with mortality.

Holmes wanted his class to become emotionally involved.

"If they didn't, you'd wonder what was wrong," he said.

The teacher had read an account of the endless torment of a man who found the charred bodies that day.

"It brought tears to my eyes," he said.

Remembering young men

Helena High School students research Mann Gulch for listing as national historic site

By LESLIE McCARTNEY
Lee Montana Newspapers

HELENA – Had he lived, smokejumper Joseph Silva would be 74 years old. Staring from a faded picture dressed in a military uniform he resembles high-school senior Tanner Jackson, minus the hair streaked with yellow.

Jackson, who is roughly the same age as Silva was when he died, sees the similarity, too. "We look the same," he said.

Silva was one of 13 men who died in the Mann Gulch fire almost five decades ago. Now their lives, and agonizing deaths, have made an indelible impression on 21 teen-agers involved in a unique project at Helena High School.

"There was one thing that struck me about Henry Thol's cross. At the base of the monument was a small flat stone, very old by the look of it, on which was carved a message. "Henry ... you ... love ... always ... Sara." Although the entire message was indecipherable the emotion expressed in those few words moved me more than anything else I witnessed in Mann Gulch."

– Tanner Jackson

Aug. 5, 1999, will mark the 50th anniversary of the tragedy.

"It changed dramatically the way wildland fires were fought," said Forest Service archaeologist Carl Davis.

"We felt we needed to give formal recognition and protection to the landscape."

With limited resources, the Forest Service sought help. Enter the X-Cel class at Helena High, which had collaborated with the agency in marking trails in past years.

Thus the task of researching and documenting the significance of Mann Gulch to formally nominate the site for the National Register of Historic Places was embraced by the teen-agers and teacher Lee Holmes.

Although the students and Holmes weren't prepared for was the impact that hours of research and learning about the lives and deaths of 13 young men brought about. "It has come alive for them," Holmes said.

Heatnes Paulson, a 17-year-old with a pierced eyebrow and a cloud of brown curls, recounted a memorable experience from early in the research.

On a chilly, hot September day, the entire class and seven chaperones spent the night near the site in the Gates of the Mountains Wilderness. They scouted the area, and even tried running up the gulch with 75 pounds of 1940s-style smokejumper equipment.

Students hurried up the gulch, weighed down by equipment, imagining they could outrun a hungry fire.

"It was literally impossible," Jackson said.

Missoulian, Tuesday, November 3, 1998
FROM PAGE B1

Mann

Continued

Then came a lecture by forester Dave Turner. As he began to talk about the events on a stifling day nearly 50 years ago, clouds and lightning closed in to create a backdrop.

They heard about a fire that at first appeared to be a routine 60-acre blaze, just off the Missouri River. And how the fire had blown up in the dry grass and 100-degree heat, chasing the young men up the side of the gulch.

They heard how 11 firefighters perished in the conflagration and how two others lingered in unspeakable pain for two days before they died.

After hearing of the bravery and tragedy of that day, the students walked silently around the 13 white crosses that dot the hillside of Mann Gulch, touching each one.

"It was eerie," Jackson said. "We got up, stood back and realized that these were real people."

"Some of these men were 17, 18, 19 years old," Holmes said. "The same age as most of the young men and women in this class."

The moving experience had a bonding effect as well, both Paulson and Jackson noted. The 21 classmates who trekked into the gulch came back as friends.

Back at school, they dug into history. They read "Young Men and Fire" by Norman Maclean, they wrote obituaries for each of the men and dreamed up an idea for a video documentary, which will be shown later this year.

They took a field trip to the smokejumper training center in Missoula and listened to a firsthand account by Earl Cooley, who was jump master for the Mann Gulch fire. They have studied newspaper accounts of the fire and pored over Forest Service documents.

They have touched seared metal containers from the firefighters' last meal and the smashed radio that left the firefighters cut off from all communication. They have studied firefighting techniques, and read accounts of the rescue mission and the fire itself.

They studied rocks, trees and landscape. Survivors' stories were intermingled with obituaries. Seemingly fearless teen-agers wrestled with mortality.

Holmes wanted his class to become emotionally involved.

"If they didn't, you'd wonder what was wrong," he said.

The teacher had read an account of the endless torment of a man who found the charred bodies that day.

"It brought tears to my eyes," he said.

Other events planned

- Appropriately archiving all original Forest Service documents and artifacts related to the incident.
- Set up an exhibit to be temporarily displayed at the Montana Historical Society and permanently placed at the smokejumper center at the Aerial Fire Depot in Missoula.
- A remembrance ceremony on Aug. 4 at the Mann Gulch site. Other ceremonial events also are planned.
- A series of presentations on the fire with demonstrations of current firefighting equipment at the Meriwether picnic area.

Helena INDEPENDENT RECORD (1998)

REMEMBERING OTHER LIVES

Class takes home many lessons from scene of Mann Gulch fire

Forest Service Archaeologist Carl Davis talks to the Helena High X-Cel class at Mann Gulch.

"There was one thing that struck me about (Henry) Thol's cross. At the base of the monument was a small flat stone, very old by the look of it, on which was carved a message.

"Henry...you...love...always...Sara." Although the entire message was indecipherable, the emotion expressed in those few words moved me more than anything else I witnessed in Mann Gulch.

– Senior Tanner Jackson.

Stories by LESLIE McCARTNEY
IR Staff Writer

Had he lived, smokejumper Joseph Silva would be 74 years old. Staring from a faded picture dressed in a military uniform he resembles Helena High Senior Tanner Jackson, minus the hair streaked with yellow.

Jackson, who is near the age as Silva when he died and a well-spoken handsome teen, sees it too. "We look the same," he said.

SILVA WAS ONE of the 13 men who died in the infamous Mann Gulch fire and his life — and agonizing death — has made an indelible impression on 21 high schoolers involved in a unique project at Helena High School.

Aug. 5, 1999, marks the 50th anniversary of the well-known tragedy. "It changed dramatically the way wild land fires were fought," said Forest Archaeologist Carl Davis.

"We felt we needed to give formal recognition and protection to the landscape."

With limited resources, the Forest Service sought help. Enter the X-Cel class at Helena High School, which had collaborated with the Forest Service in marking trails in past years.

THE TASK of researching and documenting the significance of Mann Gulch to formally nominate the site to the National Register of Historic Places was embraced by the small band of high schoolers and teacher Lee Holmes.

What the students and Holmes weren't prepared for was the impact that hours of research and studying about the lives and deaths of 13 young men brought about. "It has come alive for them," Holmes said.

HEATHER PAULSON, a 16-year-old with a pierced eyebrow and a cloud of brown curls, recounted a memorable experience from early in the research.

On a fitfully hot September Thursday, the entire class — along with seven chaperones — spent the night near the site. They hiked, scouted the site and even tried running up the gulch with 75 pounds of 1940s-style smokejumper equip-

(More CLASS, page 7A)

Forest Service prepares for fire's 50th anniversary

The effort of Helena High's X-Cel class to designate the site of the Mann Gulch fire on the historic register is just one part of an overall effort to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the fire.

The Helena National Forest hopes to involve other community groups to help preserve and protect the site. Events planned for the anniversary will commemorate the tragedy, honor those who lost their lives and acknowledge the historical significance of the site, according to Amy Teegarden of the Forest Service.

"The beauty of having a class do the nomination is that it reflects a public effort, not just an agency effort," said Carl Davis of the Helena Forest Service. At the end of X-Cel's research, the class will submit an 11-page nomination for the site.

With luck, the site will be named to the National Register of Historic Places by spring, Davis said.

Other planned events include:

■ Appropriately archiving all original Forest Service documents and artifacts related to the incident. "We've had a lot of problems

(More 50TH, page 7A)

Helena INDEPENDENT RECORD (1998) conn.

Class

Continued from Page 1A

ment.

Students ran up the gulch, weighed down by equipment, imagining they could outrun a hungry fire. "It was literally impossible," Jackson said.

Then came a lecture by forester Dave Turner. As he began to talk of the fire that began on a stifling hot day 50 years ago, clouds and lighting closed in to create a backdrop.

And after he finished up the tale that resulted in the end of 13 lives, the survival of three and the painful death of two men who lived a short while, the students wandered around wordlessly touching the 13 white crosses that dot the hillside on Mann Gulch.

"It was eerie," Jackson said. "We got up, stood back and realized that these were real people."

"Some of these men were 17, 18, 19 years old," Holmes said. "The same age as most of the young men and women in this class."

Both Jackson and Paulson noted the moving experience had a bonding effect as well. She said the 21 strangers in the fifth-year X-Cel class that trekked into the gulch came back as friends.

And they came back to school and dug into history. They all read "Young Men and Fire" by Norman Maclean, they wrote obituaries for each of the men and dreamed up an idea for a video documentary, which will be shown later this year.

They have taken a field trip to the Smokejumpers' school in Missoula and listened to a first-hand account by spotter Earl Cooley. They have studied newspaper accounts of the fire and perused Forest Service documents.

They have touched seared metal containers from the firefighters' last meal and the smashed radio that left the firefighters cut off from all communication. They have studied firefighting techniques, and read accounts of the rescue mission and the fire itself.

They studied rocks, trees and landscape. Survivors' stories were intermingled with obituaries. Seemingly fearless teen-agers wrestled with mortality.

Holmes wanted his class to become emotionally involved. "If they didn't, you'd wonder what was wrong," he said. A thoughtful, soft-spoken and longtime teacher, he read an account of the endless torment of a man who found the charred bodies.

"It brought tears to my eyes," he said.

50th

Continued from Page 1A

with people walking around and carting off stuff," Davis said of the site. The agency hopes to transfer all the original records to the Montana Historical Society.

■ Set up an exhibit to be temporarily displayed at the Montana Historical Society and permanently placed at the Missoula Smokejumper's Center.

■ A remembrance ceremony on Aug. 4 at the Mann Gulch site. Other ceremonial events are planned as well.

■ A series of presentations on the fire with demonstrations of current firefighting equipment at the Meriwether picnic area.

"We want to honor not just the smokejumpers but those who fight wildland fires," Davis said.

Helena INDEPENDENT RECORD June 1999

Mann Gulch put on historic register

By GRANT SASEK
IR Staff Writer

It's official — Mann Gulch, the site of a blaze that killed 13 firefighters 50 years ago, is a historic place.

The rugged, dry gulch along the Missouri River north of Helena has been listed on the National Register of Historic Sites. That designation will offer protection to the area and should make funding more available for maintenance and improvement projects.

Mann Gulch is the first location on the Helena National Forest to be listed on the register. The official recognition of its significance comes just two months before the Aug. 5 silver anniversary of the fatal fire.

'It's a red flag that people have to pay attention to during the planning process.'

THE SITE WAS officially nominated for the register by the Helena Forest, but much of the credit for getting the site listed goes to Helena High School students who took on the challenge as a class project, said Carl Davis, an archaeologist for the forest.

"To get formally nominated and become listed is a fairly exacting process that takes a lot of time and energy," Davis said. "Students did most of the research and the Forest Service wrote the nomination."

WORK ON THE PROJECT began last September, and the nomination was sent to the Keeper of the National Register this spring. Davis said he received word on the decision to list the site in mid-May.

The listing will give the gulch legal protection when foresters plan activities in the area, Davis said.

"It's a red flag that people have to pay attention to during the planning process," Davis said.

THE DESIGNATION also could make it easier to secure money from within the Forest Service and from outside funding sources for projects in the gulch, he added.

Continued from Page 2A

A sign marking the gulch as a historic site "either has gone up or is going up" near where the gulch meets the Missouri River, Davis said. The gulch is just downstream from the Gates of the Mountains.

Because of the remote location of Mann Gulch, events planned to mark the anniversary of the tragedy are scheduled for Aug. 5 at the state Capitol.

Davis said that, along with being one of the worst disasters in Forest Service history, the deaths of the 13 young firefighters changed the way foresters fight fires.

"Mann Gulch was a wake up call for smoke jumpers," Davis said. "It led to major changes."

Mann Gulch placed on National Register

HELENA (AP) — Mann Gulch, where a fire in 1949 killed 13 men as they battled the blaze, has been placed on the National Register of Historic Sites.

The designation affords protection and is likely to enhance applications for money to maintain and improve the location. The gulch 25 miles from Helena is next to the Missouri River, and is part of the Helena National Forest.

It was 50 years ago, on Aug. 5, 1949, when the 13 firefighters were overcome by a 200-foot-high wall of flame. Eleven died in the gulch, and two more died the next day.

The tragedy is the subject of "Young Men and Fire," by Norman Maclean, and led to a number of changes in Forest Service firefighting practices.

The Forest Service nominated the site for the national register. Carl Davis, an archaeologist for the agency, said much of the credit for the listing goes to a Helena High School class.

"To get formally nominated and become listed is a fairly exacting process that takes a lot of time and energy," Davis said. "Students did most of the research and the Forest Service wrote the nomination."

The listing will give the gulch legal protection when activities in the area are planned, Davis said.

"It's a red flag that people have to pay attention to during the planning process," he said.

Great Falls TRIBUNE June 1999

Acknowledgments

Many people contributed the information included in this booklet, while others were instrumental in compiling the research into this bound format. It was a team effort and we sincerely appreciate the efforts of everyone. This booklet is a tribute to them.

A SPECIAL THANK YOU to all the family members and friends who submitted photographs, information and personal stories. Without your contributions this booklet would not have been possible.

Earl Cooley (spotter on the Mann Gulch fire and author) for his interview with us in October, 1998 and for giving us a copy of his book, Trimotor and Trail.

Carl Davis (Forest Archeologist and Historic Preservation Specialist, Helena National Forest) for helping the students with research and the writing of the application to have Mann Gulch declared a National Historic Site.

Tim Eldredge (smokejumper) for conducting the tour of the Smokejumpers' Center and giving us a copy of A Pictorial History of Smokejumping by Stan Cohen and Smokejumpers, '49 Brothers in the Sky by Starr Jenkins.

Jack Harrison (brother of James Harrison) for sharing the 1949 newspaper articles, his brother's personal possessions and his wonderful stories about his brother.

Jack F. Mathews (former smokejumper and author) for all of the photographs and information he sent.

Gerry Hellman McHenry (wife of William Hellman) for graciously agreeing to be interviewed in October 1998 and for the photographs.

Richard Rothermel (researcher and author, USDA Forest Service) for his patient explanation of fire theory.

Helena School District #1 for their support of the X-CEL program and equipment contributions.

Ken Stuker (Principal of Helena High School) for his support of the Mann Gulch fire project.

Merrill Schwartz Jr. (former firefighter) for his photographs.

Amy Teegarden (Community Outreach Coordinator, USFS) for suggesting this project to the X-CEL class as well as coordinating all the presentation events.

Dave Turner (Fire Management Officer, Helena National Forest) for his unpublished manuscript: The Thirteenth Fire and for sparking the interest and passion for this project.

USFS and Helena National FS for unrestricted access to files, records, maps, photos and for providing transportation.

X-CEL students and advisors for research, graphics, narratives, communication, editing, and presentations.